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Allegiances

RiverClan:

Leader: Ashstar- gray and white tom

Deputy: Shadebelly- large gray tom with a pale gray underbelly

Medicine Cat: Nightwhisper- long-haired black tom

Apprentice: Silverheart- striped pale gray tabby she-cat

Warriors:

Tawnyclaw- handsome dark gray tom with blue eyes

Apprentice: Minnowpaw

Twigtail- brown tom with dark brown eyes

Apprentice- Sorrelpaw

Bristlepelt- ginger and white tom

Birchclaw- white tom with gray spots

Ashflower- pretty gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Cloudsplash- black and white tom

Sweetstripe- sand-colored she-cat

Apprentice- Mudpaw

Cherryheart- tortoiseshell she-cat

Nettlestep- sleek brown she-cat

Pebblenose- fluffy white she-cat

Flamepelt- small ginger tom

Apprentices:

Minnowpaw- speckled silver she-cat

Sorrelpaw- pale ginger she-cat

Mudpaw- thickset brown tom

Queens:

Maplenose- brown tabby she-cat (mother to Hailclaw's kits: Redkit, a red tom with green eyes; Cinderkit, a gray she-kit; and Poppykit, a pale brown tabby she-kit)

Elders:

Blacktail- battle-scarred gray tom with a black tail

Troutleap- dappled gray tom with long legs

Thunderclan:

Leader: Duskstar- long-furred gray tom

Deputy: Sandstripe- sand-colored tom with pale stripes

Apprentice: Rainpaw

Medicine Cat: Dawnpelt- pale gray tom with blue eyes

Warriors:

Ivystream- beautiful white she-cat with a fluffy tail

Mosswhisker- gray tabby tom with one white forepaw

Apprentice: Larkpaw

Dapplenose- tortoiseshell she-cat with a white speckled muzzle

Apprentice: Blackpaw

Amberclaw- reddish-brown tom with green eyes

Oakfoot- muscular dark ginger tom

Stormspots- gray tom with unusually spotted fur

Apprentice: Foxpaw

Mintfur- pale gray she-cat

Apprentice: Darkpaw

Copperfoot- burly ginger tom with brown paws

Swiftsky- brown and white tom with amber eyes

Graytail- gray tom with yellow eyes

Skystream- white she-cat with icy blue eyes

Pinefeather- muscular brown tom

Apprentices:

Rainpaw- silver and gray striped tom with white paws

Larkpaw- ginger she-cat with a white underbelly

Blackpaw- black tom with green eyes

Foxpaw- fluffy ginger tom

Darkpaw- dark gray tom with dark blue eyes

Queens:

Frostmuzzle- gray she-cat with a white muzzle (mother to Amberclaw's kits: Cloudkit, a small white tom; and Breezekit, a brown she-kit)

Nightwhisker- sleek black she-cat (mother to Oakfoot's kit: Goldkit, a golden-colored she-kit)

Elders:

Graythroat- white tom with a single gray patch on his throat

Mousetail- brown she-cat with a thin tail

Swiftfeather- pale gray tabby tom, mostly blind

Windclan:

Leader: Featherstar- sand-colored she-cat with green eyes

Deputy: Wasptail- muscular brown tom

Medicine Cat: Morningwish- tortoiseshell she-cat with a white chest and paws

Apprentice: Beechpaw

Warriors:

Gorsewhisker- ginger tom with short legs

Fernstripe- gray tabby she-cat

Apprentice: Yellowpaw

Russetclaw- dark ginger tom with large paws

Apprentice: Sandpaw

Crowshade- fluffy black tom

Briarwhisker- ginger she-cat

Sunstripe- ginger tom with dark stripes

Apprentice: Thornpaw

Whitefoot- gray tom with white paws

Fawnstep- russet she-cat with a white spotted underbelly

Apprentice: Sparrowpaw

Thrushfur- gray tom with a striped tail and green eyes

Goldenwing- ginger tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Spottedwind- tortoiseshell she-cat

Rowanheart- small brown tom

Apprentices:

Beechpaw- pale brown tabby she-cat

Yellowpaw- long-furred sandy she-cat

Sandpaw- pale ginger she-cat

Thornpaw- mottled gray tom

Sparrowpaw- sleek brown tom

Queens:

Poppynose- gray she-cat (expecting Crowshade's kits)

Honeytail- pretty mottled brown she-cat (mother to Whitefoot's kits: Patchkit, a gray and white she-kit; and Heatherkit, a brown tabby tom with yellow eyes)

Elders:

Grayrunner- gray tabby tom

Roseheart- once-pretty ginger she-cat

Shadowclan:

Leader: Tanglestar- black tom with long, messy fur

Deputy: Berryfoot- tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes

Apprentice: Snakepaw

Medicine Cat: Whitewhisker- gray-striped white tom

Apprentice: Juniperpaw

Warriors:

Tawnytail- black and gray she-cat

Nightfang- black tom with unusually long teeth

Apprentice: Tallpaw

Redclaw- dark ginger she-cat with a torn ear

Thorntooth- large black tom with green eyes

Shadebreeze- fluffy gray tabby she-cat

Apprentice: Whitepaw

Stormheart- black and white tom with dark blue eyes

Apprentice: Icepaw

Squirrelwhisker- russet-colored she-cat with long whiskers

Longear- pale ginger tom with large ears

Brightleaf- tortoiseshell she-cat

Adderfoot- gray tom

Talontail- gray-striped white tom with blue eyes

Voletail- dark brown tom with a short tail

Apprentices:

Snakepaw- gray tom with dark spots

Juniperpaw- orange and white she-cat with green eyes

Tallpaw- long-legged black tom with a white chest and belly

Whitepaw- fluffy white tom with gray paws and tail-tip

Icepaw- pale blue-gray she-cat with a striped tail

Queens:

Lilyheart- mottled brown she-cat (mother to Thorntooth's kits: Darkkit, a black tom with amber eyes; Brindlekit, a brown tabby she-kit; and Mistkit, a white and gray she-kit with green eyes)

Foxtail- brown tabby she-cat with a fluffy tail (expecting Tanglestar's kits)

Mosspelt- tortoiseshell and white she-cat (expecting Stormheart's kits)

Elders:

Frecklewhisker-spotted brown tom with a stumpy tail

Snowclaw- white tom with black paws

Rateye- frail brown tom

Chapter 1

A falling dewdrop roused Minnowpaw from sleep, landing squarely on her nose. Her eyes flew open and she parted her jaws in a wide yawn. Thin beams of sunlight drifted through the small gaps in the roof of the apprentices den, and a warm morning breeze ruffled Minnowpaw's fur as she stood to give her speckled silver pelt a wash. She could hear birds calling from the forest outside the camp, and beyond that the river bubbled and sang as it carried on. Rich prey-scent drifted to Minnowpaw's nose from all directions, and her paws itched to begin the day. After a long, cold-leaf bare, newleaf was here at last.

A stirring body next to her made Minnowpaw aware that Sorrelpaw had woken up. "You're awake early," the pale she-cat mumbled, yawning. She stretched out wide and began to groom herself as well. Outside the den, Minnowpaw could see that the dawn patrol was just leaving; she picked out the pelts of Birchclaw, Cloudsplash, Pebblenose, and Nettlestep.

"I couldn't sleep," Minnowpaw replied, drawing a paw over her ears. "There's so much I want to do!" Apprenticed just six sunrises ago, Minnowpaw felt as if she still knew so little about her territory, about hunting and fighting and swimming. And with the tantalizing newleaf winds beckoning her out of camp, she could hardly control her excitement.

Sorrelpaw nodded. "I should be having an assessment today," she said in between licks, eyes alight with obvious excitement. The ginger apprentice had been training for almost four moons now, and Minnowpaw knew that before long, her friend would be sleeping in the warriors' den.

"I hope Tawnyclaw takes me swimming soon," Minnowpaw said. "Maybe the river will be warm enough now." Leaf-bare had gripped the forest in icy claws and Minnowpaw, just now six moons old, had yet to attempt the one thing that RiverClan was known for, all because the water was too cold. She couldn't wait to get started!

At last, Mudpaw yawned and uncurled his thick brown body from his reed-lined nest. "Do you have to be so loud so early in the morning?" he grumbled, drawing a paw over his face.

Sorrelpaw rolled her eyes at her brother. "It's not that early, fish-brain," she teased. "You're just lazy."

Minnowpaw purred with laughter. "StarClan forbid Shadebelly ever assigns you to the dawn patrol!" she joked.

"You better get up," Sorrelpaw added. "I'm sure our mentors will need us soon."

Mudpaw yawned and sat up, licking his forepaw groggily. "Oh, Sweetstripe can wait," he muttered.

"I'd better not have to," a light voice said from outside the den, and the sand-colored head of Mudpaw's mentor poked through the entrance.

Mudpaw's eyes flashed with alarm. "Sorry, Sweetstripe," he apologized instantly, licking his fur faster, but the she-cat's hazel eyes shone with laughter. Head down in embarrassment, Mudpaw ducked out of the den after his mentor.

"Come on," Sorrelpaw said to Minnowpaw. "Let's go see if there's some fresh-kill left on the pile."

The two apprentices headed out into the camp, where the rest of their Clanmates were beginning their day as well. Ashstar and his deputy, Shadebelly, were speaking to each other outside Ashstar's den. Bristlepelt, Minnowpaw's father, and Ashflower, her mother, were sharing a large trout just outside the warriors' den, and Nightwhisper and his apprentice Silverheart were laying herbs out to dry in the middle of the camp. Minnowpaw and Sorrelpaw nearly tripped over Maplenose's three kits as they made their way to the fresh-kill pile. Maplenose was chasing them down, calling to them sternly. "I told you not to get under any cats' paws! Get back here, all of you!"

There wasn't much prey left, but Sorrelpaw picked up a water vole,

Minnowpaw's favorite, and the two apprentices bent down to share it. As they finished, Twigtail, Sorrelpaw's mentor, approached them. Minnowpaw's mentor, Tawnyclaw, was close behind.

Sorrelpaw swallowed her last mouthful of vole and greeted her mentor warmly. "Hi, Twigtail! What are we doing today?"

"Hunting," the brown tom replied briskly. "Today is a good day to assess how well you're coming along. But remember, I'll be watching you."

Sorrelpaw bolted up and headed for the entrance to the camp with Twigtail, eyes flashing with excitement. Sorrelpaw loved hunting patrols. "Don't eat any of your catch!" Minnowpaw called teasingly behind her. All apprentices knew that it was against the warrior code to eat on a hunting patrol. The first thing they were taught by their mentors was, 'The Clan must be fed first.'

Sorrelpaw flicked her tail to acknowledge her friend's taunt but did not turn around. Minnowpaw watched as she left the camp, then turned to Tawnyclaw. Sitting up straight, she asked, "So what are *we* doing today?"

"I think we should do some battle training," he mewed. Minnowpaw's claws tingled with excitement. She waited for Tawnyclaw to say something else, but instead he turned and led her out of camp towards the training area. She frowned. Minnowpaw knew Tawnyclaw was a cat of few words, and she respected him as she knew he was a great warrior, but sometimes she wished he was a little more chatty.

But by the time they got to the training area, Minnowpaw's spirits were back up, her mind racing as she wondered what moves Tawnyclaw would be teaching her today. Her mentor turned and faced her and said, "Many times in battle you will encounter an enemy who is much larger than you. Especially if you have to fight before you become a warrior, you'll need to know how to take on bigger cats. So for today's lesson, I want you to simply try and overpower me; get me in a position where, if I was an enemy warrior, I would have to concede."

Minnowpaw gaped at her mentor. He was, in fact, much larger than she was; she was a very young apprentice, and Tawnyclaw was a large, seasoned warrior. Underneath his thick, glossy, dark gray pelt were rippling muscles forged over countless moons of swimming and fighting. She gulped. She knew he wouldn't be easy to take down.

"Claws sheathed," Tawnyclaw reminded her, and she nodded. Crouching low, Minnowpaw prepared to attack, trying to decide the best way to overpower him. Before she could move, however, Tawnyclaw leaped and barreled her over, pinning her to the soft ground with his forepaws.

"An enemy is never going to give you time to plan your moves," he growled, letting her up. Embarrassment and frustration prickled Minnowpaw's pelt, and she shook herself.

"Then how am I supposed to know how to attack them?" she argued. She *knew* Tawnyclaw and had some idea of how to fight him, but she didn't know anything about warriors from other Clans! How could she fight them if she didn't know where to begin?

Tawnyclaw didn't seem fazed. "Attack first, think later," he meowed through gritted teeth. "Make your move, see how your enemy reacts, and then plan your next move according to that."

Minnowpaw shook her head. "But-"

Tawnyclaw straightened his shoulders. "Fighting is only half the battle," he interrupted. "You have to be constantly thinking. You have to be anticipating your enemy's moves as well as your own. It's something you'll learn with time," he added more softly. "Just remember the moves I've already taught you."

Minnowpaw hadn't heard her mentor ever speak so much at once, but that only annoyed her more. This was all so confusing. She kneaded the dirt with her claws, growing angry.

"Try again," Tawnyclaw instructed, blue eyes glinting in the morning sunlight.

Trying to do what he had told her, Minnowpaw launched herself at Tawnyclaw without too much thought, aiming for his shoulders. Since she was smaller, she knew she had to be somewhere he couldn't reach her. However, he simply stepped to the side and sent Minnowpaw crashing to the ground. She hissed.

"That doesn't mean you shouldn't think at all!" Tawnyclaw sounded exasperated. "Any warrior can see you making a leap like that. Predictable moves make you vulnerable to an attack."

Minnowpaw glared at her mentor. What did he want from her? It wasn't like she'd be fighting ShadowClan at sunhigh! She opened her mouth to protest, but Tawnyclaw cut her off again. "Try again," he meowed.

Bristling, Minnowpaw attacked again. But this time, she didn't leap at him, instead running straight towards him. He clearly hadn't expected it, and his eyes flashed in alarm, but he still tried to jump out of the way. Anticipating it this time, Minnowpaw turned the same direction and barreled into him paws-first, knocking him down. A surge of triumph ran through her as she grabbed her mentor's broad shoulders with her forepaws, pushing him onto the ground. She'd done it! But then Tawnyclaw thrust his head up into her chest, knocking the wind out of her and flipping her backwards onto the ground again.

"That was better," he said, standing. "But you hesitated when you thought you'd won. An enemy warrior will take any advantage to get back on his paws."

"But I had you!" Minnowpaw protested. Wasn't that good enough?

"Yes, you did," Tawnyclaw conceded. "But you only knocked me down once. If you'd been using your claws, you still wouldn't have inflicted enough injury to send me running away. An enemy warrior would still have plenty of fight left. You have to make me want to run away with my tail tucked between my legs. Do it again."

They practiced until sunhigh. Minnowpaw grew more frustrated as the day passed; Tawnyclaw seemed to find fault with everything she did. She got better each time, but he kept criticizing her even when

she thought she was doing well. By the time he told her they were done, Minnowpaw was itching to unsheath her claws.

"That's enough for today," Tawnyclaw said at last. Minnowpaw couldn't believe he was so calm when she was seething. She'd never tried so hard at anything before, and it wasn't even close to good enough for him!

"Good!" she spat, turning back towards camp. "Now I can go disappoint someone else!" She lashed her tail as she stomped through the ferns.

Tawnyclaw caught up with her. "I'm not disappointed in you," he said evenly, seeming almost surprised at her words. Minnowpaw rolled her eyes, but he went on. "You did very well for being so young and inexperienced. I know you can do better, but you've got a great start."

"You mean you want me to do it perfectly," she growled.

"I'll never expect perfection from you, Minnowpaw," he told her softly. "There's not a warrior in the forest that could fight a perfect battle."

"Then why do you have to push me like that?"

"It's my job! The other Clans won't take it easy on you in battle, so why should I? I want you to be prepared for anything. I want you to be a good warrior!"

Minnowpaw ignored him and sped up, trying to get away from him. She'd never been so angry. He wasn't even listening to her!

She heard Tawnyclaw racing up to her, and suddenly he spun around in front of her and thrust his muzzle in her face. "That kind of attitude is not going to get you your warrior name!" he spat, and Minnowpaw saw her own rage reflected in his eyes.

Minnowpaw turned sharply around and headed in the opposite direction, towards the river. She just wanted to get away from Tawnyclaw. "Where are you going?" he called.

"Where does it look like I'm going?" she retorted. She pictured him bristling at her words, and half-expected him to chase after her.

Instead he just called, "Well, then don't come back empty-pawed!"

Watch me, Minnowpaw thought to herself, and stomped away towards the river.

Chapter 2

Up ahead, the river gurgled and sang as it flowed and wound through the forest. The last of the leaf-bare snowmelt had kept it full, but not overflowing. Minnowpaw had heard stories from the elders of the river running over and spilling onto the banks, and even rising as far as the camp. Troutleap had told her of times when the river ran so rapidly that it could sweep a full-grown RiverClan warrior off his feet and carry him away like a bit of fresh-kill, especially when newleaf broke and the snow and ice melted.

But leaf-bare had ended mildly, and the river was just slightly swollen, and the sight of the cool, crisp water was enticing to Minnowpaw. She'd only been here to fish before, but still never to swim. That thought made her angrier; how could she be a RiverClan cat if she didn't know how to swim? Did Tawnyclaw even care about her enough to train her properly? Well, she thought, she'd show him. She'd learn how to swim on her own.

She padded to the edge of the river and felt the pebbles smooth under her paws. The edge of the river lapped gently against her claws, and her instinct called her forward. She was a RiverClan cat; this is what she was born to do. But suddenly the water looked like an enemy warrior, foreign and unpredictable. She heard Tawnyclaw's voice in her head, *"Don't overthink it."* She growled and shrugged the thought away, and gingerly stepped into the water.

The cold shocked her at first, rooting her to the spot. It was the kind of cold that seeped into her bones, as if it was freezing her in place. After moving her paws around a bit, she adjusted to the frigid temperature and slowly began to move deeper into the river until the water lapped at her belly fur.

Minnowpaw gulped as she thought about going any farther. Once her feet were off the safety of the riverbed below, would she know what to do? If her instinct called her into the river, would it help her to swim in it? Tawnyclaw's voice still nagged in the back of her mind, telling her to just do it, so she did. She pushed forward and

was suddenly floating in the middle of the cold river.

For a short moment, Minnowpaw felt triumphant, but then she began to sink. Nearly panicking, she kicked out with all four paws and spluttered as her mouth and nose went under. She struggled to find a rhythm, and after several moments of flailing wildly, she managed to paddle smoothly and evenly, keeping her head above water. She was swimming!

Minnowpaw fought the urge to yowl in triumph; she was too close to Sunningrocks, which were currently ThunderClan territory, and she didn't want to risk an enemy patrol seeing her alone in the river. So she held her tongue and instead focused on the movements of her paws in the water. It felt so natural to be swimming, and the water simply glided past her sleek pelt, kept glossy by the fish she ate.

Minnowpaw swam several fox-lengths down the river and back again to where she'd started, and she only lost her balance twice. She was beginning to feel tired as she pulled herself onto the bank. Between her training session and swimming, she was ready to curl up in her nest and sleep for a moon. She was hungry, too, and she pictured the fresh-kill pile heaping with all kinds of tasty prey to choose from.

But Minnowpaw knew that she couldn't go back to camp without fresh-kill of her own and expect to be able to pick something off the pile. Grimly, she realized that after her fight with Tawnyclaw, she'd be lucky if she was allowed to eat tonight at all! No matter what, though, she knew she should bring back fresh-kill; it was her job as an apprentice to feed the elders, and she knew that Maplenose and her three kits would appreciate full bellies too. So Minnowpaw waded back into the river and waited.

It didn't take long for her to catch two fat, juicy fish. After all, leaf-bare didn't take its toll on river prey like it did in the forest. RiverClan had prey through all the seasons as long as the river didn't freeze. Carrying the two fish awkwardly by their tails, Minnowpaw headed, soaking wet, back to camp.

However, she paused outside the entrance, tail twitching anxiously.

Swimming in the river had dissolved all of her anger at Tawnyclaw, but would her mentor still be mad at her? She had to admit to herself that she'd been unfair with him, and possibly with herself. She knew she shouldn't have run off like she did, and she should've focused on controlling her temper. Of course Tawnyclaw wouldn't be unfair to her! He was RiverClan's most senior warrior, respected even by the elders; he *was* only doing his job. Minnowpaw gulped. In disobeying her mentor, she had probably gotten herself in serious trouble, especially after she'd run off on her own without permission. Minnowpaw supposed it didn't matter now; it was already done. So, head held high and jaws laden with fresh-kill, she padded into camp.

Many heads turned to look her way as she crossed the clearing, heading for the fresh-kill pile. Minnowpaw wondered if the whole Clan knew about her fight with Tawnyclaw, or if they were just surprised to see her without him. To them, she was still basically a kit. She shrugged off their glances.

"Minnowpaw!" She winced at the sound of her mentor's voice. Slowly, she turned to see him walking towards her. But where she expected to see rage burning in his gaze, there was simply a calm level of authority. He eyed Minnowpaw up and down, his expression turning to surprise. "What have you been doing?" he asked, wide-eyed at Minnowpaw's dripping pelt.

"Swimming," she said around the fish in her mouth. She couldn't help but feel a little smug about it, even though she knew she shouldn't.

"Alone? You figured it out yourself?" Minnowpaw nodded, trying not to get frustrated at his disbelief. "I'm impressed," Tawnyclaw admitted. Then he said, more sternly, "Hurry up and put those on the pile. Ashstar wants to see you."

Minnowpaw's heart dropped. Now she was in for it! She suddenly felt sick as she deposited her fish and followed her mentor across to their leader's den. How would he punish her for not listening to Tawnyclaw? Would she be confined to the camp for a moon, unable to attend the upcoming Gathering? Would she be forced to take on all the worst apprentice duties by herself? Her stomach felt heavier

than her sodden pelt as she and Tawnyclaw paused outside Ashstar's den.

Tawnyclaw announced himself, and Ashstar called from inside, "Come in!"

To Minnowpaw's despair, Shadebelly was there as well. Now she would be reprimanded by her mentor, leader, *and* Clan deputy! Shame and guilt washed over her as she sat down next to Tawnyclaw, ears burning.

"You've been swimming?" Shadebelly asked, sounding surprised. "Alone?" Minnowpaw knew it was no secret that Tawnyclaw hadn't taken her for a swimming lesson yet.

"Yes," she mewed weakly, not looking at the burly gray tom.

"I guess she managed to figure it out herself," Tawnyclaw explained, his voice giving away nothing he might be feeling or thinking.

Minnowpaw managed to lift her gaze to meet Ashstar's. The gray and white tom hadn't said a word, and his gaze was thoughtful as he looked at her. At last he said, "Well, I suppose that's one way to channel your anger."

Minnowpaw's ears twitched in surprise. Wasn't he angry with her? She said nothing.

Ashstar went on. "I can tell that you know what you did was wrong," he meowed. Minnowpaw nodded. "I assigned Tawnyclaw as your mentor for a reason, Minnowpaw. He's a strong warrior, and an asset to this Clan." Tawnyclaw shifted next to Minnowpaw as if uncomfortable with such high praise from his leader. "He's a good mentor for you because you're headstrong, and you want to do everything well. You have a very strong spirit, and he's the best cat to help you become the greatest warrior you can be. But arrogance will get you nowhere."

Minnowpaw gasped. "I wasn't trying to be arrogant!" she protested, unable to keep the emotion out of her voice. "I just got frustrated, and it felt like nothing I did was good enough!" She flashed a glance

at Tawnyclaw, but he was as still and quiet as a stone.

"We've already talked with Tawnyclaw," Shadebelly put in. "Nothing you did was bad. You're still learning. I understand how hard it can be to know so little when you feel the pressure of being a warrior. It's important to take things slowly and understand that even if you're not where you want to be now, someday you will be. It's going to take time and patience, and a lot of hard work."

Minnowpaw looked back to Ashstar. He was nodding as his deputy spoke. "Shadebelly is right. Nothing about being a warrior is easy, and you're going to have to work very hard for it. And that includes listening to your mentor, even when you think he doesn't have your best interests at heart. I can assure you, Tawnyclaw does."

Minnowpaw suddenly felt ashamed. Had she made her mentor feel bad? She looked at him again, but his gaze was understanding. "I get it," he meowed. "I should've been more fair to you. I've trained enough apprentices that I should know not all cats are the same. I was thinking about the training, not about you specifically. I'm sorry."

Minnowpaw jumped up, feeling even more horrible. How could she be so selfish? Tawnyclaw wasn't the one who should be apologizing! "No!" she exclaimed. "It was my fault! I got mad and didn't listen to you, then I stormed off like a stupid kit! You're a great mentor, really, but I let my temper get the best of me!" She was unable to keep her voice steady as she added, "I understand if you don't want to be my mentor anymore." She sat back down and kept her eyes on her paws. She wouldn't blame him if he decided to give up on her. After all, she'd been quick to give up on *him*.

Surprise rippled through the three toms. "I'm still your mentor!" Tawnyclaw gasped. "That will never change." Minnowpaw managed to meet his gaze. "I enjoy teaching you. You're very smart and you already have the heart of a warrior. I think we both overreacted today, so let's have a fresh start, okay?"

"Okay!" Minnowpaw agreed quickly.

Ashstar let out a purr of amusement, and Shadebelly flicked his tail

reassuringly over Minnowpaw's flank. "What we're trying to say, Minnowpaw," Ashstar meowed, "is that you're doing fine in all your training. Clearly you managed to learn how to swim in just one day, without the help of a mentor. You're going to be a great warrior one day."

"I will!" Minnowpaw exclaimed. "I promise I will! I want to be a great warrior and-"

She stopped as she realized she had interrupted her leader again. She closed her mouth, and Ashstar finished. "However, we're still disappointed in your behavior today. I know you're young and you don't have everything figured out yet, but you still have to face the consequences of your actions."

Minnowpaw simply nodded.

"From now until the next Gathering," Shadebelly put in, "you will be taking care of the elders. Keep their bedding clean, check them for ticks, and bring them fresh-kill every day, before you take any fresh-kill for yourself or train with Tawnyclaw."

"And don't ask your denmates to help," Tawnyclaw added.

Minnowpaw nodded again. "I understand," she mewed. She supposed there were far worse punishments.

Ashstar dismissed her with a flick of his tail. On the way out of the den, he said, "Remember! You're doing just fine!"

Chapter 3

"Remember to dive quickly and grab the fish before they have a chance to swim away."

The sun was high in the sky, and Minnowpaw stood almost belly-deep in the river as Tawnyclaw taught her how to dive for fish. She'd spent the morning replacing Blacktail's and Troutleap's bedding and cracking their fleas between her teeth, listening to Troutleap's stories and Blacktail's complaining. She'd been so relieved when she'd finally finished and was able to join Tawnyclaw on a hunting patrol with Flamepelt, RiverClan's youngest warrior, and Birchclaw. The sun warmed her pelt from above and the river cooled her paws as it flowed lazily on, and she relished the combination.

Tawnyclaw suddenly vanished as he launched himself under the surface of the water, returning almost immediately with a large fish in his jaws. Tossing it onto the bank, he meowed, "Now you try it."

Minnowpaw concentrated hard on the water. They were by the deepest part of the river, where the fattest fish swam and cats had to dive to catch them. There were so many fish, and they were moving quickly, and Minnowpaw found it hard to focus on just one. Taking a deep breath, she dove after one, the shock of the cold stinging her face, and managed to close her teeth around it. Standing back up, she shook the water from her whiskers. She'd caught one!

"Very good," Tawnyclaw praised her.

A little farther upstream, the water splashed as Flamepelt slapped his paw down and hooked a fish of his own. The ginger warrior looked proud as he flopped it onto the bank, killing it. "Not a bad hunt," he called to Minnowpaw and her mentor. His golden pelt shone radiantly in the newleaf sunlight, making him look like the sun itself. He shook the water from his whiskers as he joined them.

Birchclaw padded over from where he'd been fishing, two fish clamped in his jaws. "Let's head back to camp," he meowed. "We've caught more than plenty." Flamepelt picked up his catch, and Minnowpaw and Tawnyclaw split the pile they'd caught between them, and the four cats returned to camp.

A quarter moon had passed since Minnowpaw and Tawnyclaw's fight, but Minnowpaw's shame and punishment had humbled her. She had to admit that looking after the elders wasn't horrible; Blacktail was always grumpy, but Troutleap was fun and energetic and loved to tell her stories. She had almost begun to look forward to taking care of them each day. However, as she realized that it was almost the full moon, she felt relieved that her punishment was nearly over. She wondered if she'd be allowed to go to the Gathering this time, or if Ashstar would make her wait until the next one because of how she'd acted. As the hunting patrol returned to camp, she hoped she would be going.

Minnowpaw dropped all but the largest fish on the fresh-kill pile. "I'll take this to Nightwhisper and Silverheart," she told her mentor. She'd become fond of the medicine cats, particularly Silverheart, during her time collecting mouse bile and other herbs for all of the elders' aches and pains. The pretty young medicine cat apprentice was always friendly with Minnowpaw and seemed to enjoy her company. Nightwhisper was kind as well, though a bit more reserved, with a strange air of wisdom around him that Minnowpaw knew only medicine cats possessed.

Tawnyclaw nodded. "Good idea," he mewed. "Then you can take a break if you'd like. Maybe later we can join the evening patrol."

The medicine den was overflowing with strange, pungent odors as Minnowpaw pushed her way in. She only recognized the smell of juniper; as a kit, she'd eaten too much one time and given herself a bellyache, and Nightwhisper had given her some juniper to help. The other smells were strange and foreign, some bitter and others sweet. Minnowpaw could see Nightwhisper's tail poking out of a small tunnel at the back. He was muttering something. Silverheart was neatly arranging piles of herbs in the middle of the den, tossing some shriveled leaves and wrinkled, rotten berries aside as she worked. She looked up as Minnowpaw entered.

"Hi, Minnowpaw!" Her blue eyes were bright. "Is that for us?" She eyed the fish Minnowpaw held.

Minnowpaw placed the fresh-kill in front of the striped gray tabby. "Yes," she replied. "I just got back from a hunting patrol."

"Thanks!" Silverheart meowed. "I haven't had the chance to eat today. *Some* cat had me traipsing all over the territory all morning!" Her mew was good-natured and laced with humor. She cast a sly glance backwards to where Nightwhisper was emerging from the small tunnel.

Nightwhisper looked at Minnowpaw. "All the herbs are finally returning with newleaf," he explained. "Leaf-bare always leaves the supplies low. It's good to stock up again." He saw the fish and nodded to Minnowpaw in thanks. She ducked back out of the den and saw Sorrelpaw and Mudpaw picking through the fresh-kill pile.

"Hey, Minnowpaw!" Mudpaw called. "Are you busy?"

Minnowpaw bounded over. "Nope!" she replied. "Tawnyclaw says I can rest for a bit."

"Thank StarClan!" Sorrelpaw meowed. "He's had you running all over camp for *days!* It feels like we've hardly seen you with all the work you've been doing."

"Well, I did deserve it," Minnowpaw reminded her friend. "But tomorrow is the full moon, so my punishment will be over then." The three apprentices each picked up a piece of fresh-kill and settled outside their den to eat. Minnowpaw's belly was growling with hunger.

"I wonder if you'll get to go to the Gathering," Mudpaw mumbled around a huge mouthful of fish.

Sorrelpaw rolled her eyes at her brother and asked Minnowpaw, "Has Tawnyclaw said anything about it?"

Taking a bite out of her water vole, Minnowpaw shook her head. She swallowed and replied, "No, he hasn't. I wouldn't be surprised if Ashstar makes me stay behind this time. But I really hope I can go.

Are you guys going?"

Both apprentices nodded, and Minnowpaw was suddenly more afraid that she'd be left in camp without her friends while they got to attend the Gathering. Pawsteps behind them made her look up.

Tawnyclaw was standing over her. "Don't worry about it, Minnowpaw," he reassured his apprentice. "I've just been talking to Ashstar. You'll be allowed to attend the Gathering; you've learned your lesson."

Minnowpaw beamed at her mentor. "Oh, thank you!" she exclaimed. The gray warrior nodded and walked away.

Out of the corner of Minnowpaw's eye, she saw Flamepelt approaching with his own fresh-kill. Sorrelpaw beckoned him with a flick of her tail and the young tom joined the apprentices.

"I was wondering if you'd be allowed to go," Flamepelt mewed thoughtfully to Minnowpaw. "I got in huge trouble with Bristlepelt once, and he didn't let me to a Gathering for moons!" He took a bit of fish.

Minnowpaw had no clue that her father had mentored Flamepelt; he had been given his warrior name just before Minnowpaw was apprenticed. "I guess I got lucky," she meowed. "Usually Tawnyclaw is as grumpy as my father!"

"Oh, come on," Sorrelpaw exclaimed, swallowing a mouthful. "Everyone can see that Tawnyclaw has a soft spot for you! He never would have been so easy on Pebblenose if she had gotten in trouble like you did."

Minnowpaw's ears felt hot. Surely Tawnyclaw treated her the same as he had treated the fluffy white warrior? "I don't think it's that," she said.

"What is it, then?" Flamepelt asked.

Minnowpaw shrugged. "I think he just knows that I learned my lesson. He said so himself. I think he knew I already felt worse than I could after any punishment. I was a real mouse-brain."

Flamepelt purred in amusement. "Every apprentice is a mouse-brain sometimes," he pointed out.

Mudpaw snorted with laughter. "Everyone except for you, you mean!" His hazel eyes shone with amusement.

Flamepelt stared at the brown tom. "What do you mean?" he asked, holding back laughter. "I'm sure I was mouse-brained loads of times!"

Sorrelpaw shook her head. "Sorry, Flamepelt, but not really," she said. "I don't think you ever *could* do anything as mouse-brained as Minnowpaw!" Minnowpaw shot her friend a glare and Sorrelpaw added, "No offense!"

"What do you mean?" Minnowpaw asked.

"Oh, you should have seen him!" Mudpaw said, rolling over onto his back. "He'd run all the way to Highstones and back if Bristlepelt would have asked him! You'd think the warrior code told him when to eat and sleep and make dirt!" He howled with laughter.

Sorrelpaw was laughing, too. "It was always, 'What now, Bristlepelt?' and 'Of course, Bristlepelt!' Flamepelt was the most innocent apprentice the forest has ever seen! I don't think he even know *how* to get in trouble!"

Flamepelt looked half-embarrassed but was laughing along with his former denmates. Minnowpaw could picture him as an eager apprentice, doing everything his mentor asked on command and following the warrior code with every hair on his pelt. She couldn't imagine him ever getting angry or upset as she had. In fact, she wondered if the flame-colored warrior had ever been angry in his life!

The four cats continued to share tongues, talking and laughing and grooming each other's pelts as the warm sun shone down on them. Minnowpaw enjoyed the company of her friends, and by now her quarrel with Tawnyclaw was just an unpleasant memory. She wondered if the incident had made her a better cat, and if she could now simply move on and continue training, working hard to earn

her warrior name. But for now all she knew was a full belly, a sun-warmed pelt, the comfort of her friends, and the exciting reminder that she'd be attending the Gathering tomorrow.

Chapter 4

Bright white moonlight bathed the forest, turning the trees and rocks silver as the Gathering patrol approached the river and began to cross the stepping stones. Minnowpaw, flanked by Flamepelt and Sorrelpaw, followed Cloudsplash and Sweetstripe. Troutleap and Cherryheart brought up the rear. Ahead of the patrol, Ashstar crossed the river first, followed by Shadebelly, Twigtail, and Nightwhisper.

The stones were easy to cross, and as soon as Minnowpaw found herself on the other bank, Ashstar was leading his cats farther along towards Fourtrees. Minnowpaw had never seen the massive oaks before, and her fur was bristling with excitement. Flamepelt looked at her. "Nervous?"

"A little," Minnowpaw admitted. She knew she would be among cats from all four clans, and the idea of talking to any of them seemed daunting. "But mostly I'm excited." Flamepelt and Sorrelpaw had promised to introduce her to some of the other apprentices, and she wondered what the other Clans would be like. All she knew about them came from stories she'd heard from her Clanmates.

At last Ashstar stopped at the top of the ridge that sloped down to the moor. After making sure that all his cats had caught up, he flicked his ears in signal and he and Shadebelly led them all down towards the clearing.

The sight of Fourtrees nearly took Minnowpaw's breath away. The trees were huge! In the middle of them stood the Great Rock, which Minnowpaw had heard from the elders was rooted as deeply as the four oaks. Already cats were gathered around Fourtrees, and Minnowpaw picked up the vaguely familiar smell of Windclan, which she knew from border patrols.

The RiverClan cats streamed into the clearing and immediately dispersed among the skinny, wiry WindClan warriors. Minnowpaw immediately lost sight of Flamepelt among the throng of unfamiliar

cats, but then she felt herself guided along by Sorrelpaw. "Come on," the pale ginger apprentice said. "Let's go see the WindClan apprentices. I think ShadowClan is here, too."

A strong, unpleasant smell wafted towards Minnowpaw's nose and she saw more cats slipping silently into the hollow from the darkness of the pine forest. Their eyes glinted coldly in the moonlight, and Minnowpaw wondered if they were as fox-hearted as her Clanmates said they were. They certainly didn't look very friendly.

Sorrelpaw was leading Minnowpaw towards a group of young Windclan cats, and suddenly Flamepelt was at her side again. He apologized. "I wanted to say hi to Rowanheart. He's only just been made a warrior."

Sorrelpaw was now introducing Minnowpaw to the group. "This is Minnowpaw," she said to them. "Minnowpaw, this is Yellowpaw." She nodded to a fluffy sand-colored tabby, who dipped her head in greeting. "And this is Sparrowpaw." Minnowpaw mewed a greeting to the black tom.

"Hi!" The tom replied eagerly. Before he could say more, two ShadowClan apprentices joined them.

"Hi, guys!" Sorrelpaw greeted them with a friendly mew. "This is my friend Minnowpaw," she said to them. "She's RiverClan's newest apprentice."

"Hi, Minnowpaw," one of the apprentices mewed. She was a pale blue-gray, almost white, and her tail was striped. "I'm Icepaw. This is my brother, Snakepaw." She gestured to the other apprentice, a dark-spotted gray tom. He nodded, but said nothing.

Minnowpaw was about to ask them questions about their clans and territories, but suddenly Flamepelt hissed, "The Gathering is starting." ThunderClan had arrived quickly and silently, and now Minnowpaw could see the four Clan leaders bounding onto the Great Rock. She felt a pang of disappointment; there was so much she wanted to know about them!

Duskstar, ThunderClan's leader, yowled across the clearing to gain the attention of the gathered cats. His long gray fur was neatly groomed. Ashstar sat calmly next to him, and on his other side was Featherstar, WindClan's leader. Tanglestar jumped up last, his black fur sticking out at funny angles.

Duskstar nodded to Ashstar to speak first. Minnowpaw felt pride as her leader addressed the four Clans. "The prey is running well in RiverClan," he began. "We're seeing more Twolegs around since newleaf has begun, but they aren't causing us any trouble. And we have one new apprentice: Minnowpaw!"

Minnowpaw ducked with embarrassment as her name was cheered by the other cats. She had forgotten that Ashstar would announce her. Her leader finished, "The river is running and we are full-fed."

Hardly waiting for Ashstar to finish, Tanglestar stepped forward and called, "ShadowClan is strong!" ShadowClan warriors yowled their agreement enthusiastically below, including Icepaw and Snakepaw. *They really are very proud,* Minnowpaw thought as Tanglestar continued.

"Lilyheart has had three kits, and we have two queens expecting: Mosspelt and Foxtail." He spoke the last name with beaming pride, and Minnowpaw didn't need to wonder who the father of those kits was. Tanglestar finished, "The prey is running well and our borders are secure." He flashed a quick look at Featherstar as she said that.

Featherstar's neck fur bristled, but she paid no attention to the ShadowClan leader as she stepped forward. "WindClan is faring well, too," she called. "Prey was scarce in leaf-bare, but the rabbits have come back," she returned Tanglestar's glare at last, "and we have named two apprentices, Thornpaw and Sandpaw, and two warriors, Briarwhisker and Rowanheart."

Cheers from all Clans, except ShadowClan, erupted through the clearing. There was obvious tension between the two Clans. Did ShadowClan think WindClan was stealing prey? *Were* they stealing prey?

Lastly, Duskstar stepped forward. "Two sunrises ago," he began, "we

chased a fox off of our territory. It ran into ShadowClan territory, so keep a lookout for it," he said to Tanglestar, who dipped his head. Minnowpaw knew RiverClan had little to worry about; a fox was unlikely to cross the river. "One of our warriors, Mintfur, was injured, but thanks to Dawnpelt she is doing fine.

"We've also named a new warrior and an apprentice, Oakfoot and Darkpaw," he continued. Once again, the cats cheered. "And we have three kits in our nursery."

Minnowpaw gaped at all the Clan leaders. It seemed as if all the Clans were growing faster than RiverClan! Suddenly she was worried; this could be a serious problem for her Clan.

Flamepelt must have been thinking the same thing, for he muttered, "We must be the smallest Clan now."

Cherryheart, who was sitting in front of them, turned and mewed reassuringly, "Don't worry; there will be more kits before you know it." Minnowpaw wondered what she meant.

Just like that, the Gathering was over. "Normally, the Clans stick around a bit longer to share tongues," Flamepelt explained quietly as he and Minnowpaw padded over to join the rest of RiverClan, "but I don't think most cats are in the mood."

Minnowpaw nodded. The tension between WindClan and ShadowClan was so strong a kit could feel it, and she felt uneasiness pricking her own pelt as well as those of her Clanmates. Clearly she and Flamepelt weren't the only ones to notice that the other Clans seemed to be growing much stronger than them.

Worry filled Minnowpaw's mind. There were only three apprentices and three kits in RiverClan. Cherryheart had said there would be more kits soon, but when? And even then, it would be six moons before those kits became apprentices, let alone warriors! RiverClan couldn't spend all that time sitting on their tails waiting for more warriors, living in fear of being overpowered by the other Clans. They had to do something! But as Minnowpaw returned to camp with her Clanmates, she couldn't think of any solution.

Chapter 5

"Mouse dung!" Minnowpaw spat. She stared crossly at the rippling water where her paw had just been. The fish she'd been after had vanished. Anger seared her pelt; she should have caught it!

"Don't be so upset," Tawnyclaw said gently from beside her. "It's just one fish. We have plenty more. In fact, with this load, we'll have to flag down the evening patrol to help us carry it all back."

Minnowpaw eyed the bulging pile of fish next to her. She'd caught them all herself, and had since lost count of the slippery silver bodies. A cool evening breeze ruffled her fur, a welcome relief from the heat of the impending greenleaf. Across the river, the tops of the trees in ThunderClan's forest glowed like fire beneath the orange sunset.

Minnowpaw looked back at Tawnyclaw. "Are you sure we have enough?" she asked.

Amusement lit Tawnyclaw's eyes, but it faded to concern as Minnowpaw continued to stare at him. "Of course we have enough!" he meowed, sounding shocked. "I think you've been feeding the Clan all by yourself this past moon! I've never seen an apprentice so keen on keeping the fresh-kill pile bulging."

Minnowpaw wished she could share his enthusiasm, but she could feel nothing but worry in the back of her mind; worry that had plagued her since the Gathering over half a moon ago. She was trying to keep her Clan fed, and therefore strong, to make up for the lack of warriors and apprentices. She figured that if the other Clans had more cats, then RiverClan cats just had to be twice as strong.

Tawnyclaw was watching Minnowpaw thoughtfully. "Tell me what's really going on," he mewed with a rare softness. "You've been pushing yourself harder than usual. You've hardly been eating or sleeping, and you insist on taking twice as many patrols as your denmates. Plus there's all this fresh-kill," he gestured to the pile of

fish, "and any cat would think you've actually been trying to hurt me during battle training." When Minnowpaw didn't respond, Tawnyclaw added, "Don't feel bad about Mudpaw and Sorrelpaw becoming warriors soon. They're much older than you, and you still have plenty of time to train."

"That's not it," Minnowpaw muttered. Tawnyclaw flicked his ears for her to continue. She sighed. "I'm just worried that RiverClan isn't strong enough. We're the smallest Clan right now. I don't want us to look weak, or worse, actually *be* weak."

Understanding spread across Tawnyclaw's face. "Ah," he meowed. "I understand your concern. But trust me, RiverClan is not weak. In fact, this is the strongest we've been since I was an apprentice myself. And that was many, many moons ago," he added jokingly.

"But what if it's not enough?" Minnowpaw tried to keep the desperation out of her voice.

Tawnyclaw looked away, across the river, looking like he was trying to find the right words. "We'll have two more warriors by moonhigh," he meowed. Mudpaw and Sorrelpaw's ceremony was supposed to be today. "And it will be less than a moon before Redkit, Cinderkit, and Poppykit become apprentices. And Cherryheart has moved to the nursery. Her kits will also be a wonderful welcome to RiverClan."

Not long after the last Gathering, the tortoiseshell warrior had announced that she was having kits and moved to the nursery, much to the delight of Cloudsplash. Minnowpaw had never seen the black-and-white tom so proud. Minnowpaw had finally understood what Cherryheart meant when she said there'd soon be more kits in RiverClan. But would it be enough?

Sensing her lingering concern, Tawnyclaw added, "I know you're worried. We all are, even Ashstar. But we've had many moons of peace. Do I need to remind you that you've never seen a battle?" Minnowpaw shook her head. "Right now, RiverClan has no quarrel with any other Clan. They don't need to know that we're weaker, and as long as we appear strong, they have no need to attack us or threaten our borders. We're going to be fine."

His words lifted a weight off Minnowpaw's heart, and she let herself relax a bit. Perhaps she was just worrying over nothing. She nodded. "Okay."

"Now let's see if we can find that patrol," Tawnyclaw mewed.

As if on command, the reeds behind the two of them rustled and Ashflower, Flamepelt, Sweetstripe, and Mudpaw stepped onto the bank. "Wow!" Flamepelt exclaimed as he eyed the pile of fish beside Minnowpaw. "Good hunting, I see."

"Minnowpaw caught most of them," Tawnyclaw told him, sounding proud.

Ashflower bounded forward and gave Minnowpaw a swift lick on her ears. "Well, thanks to you, RiverClan will feast tonight," she meowed affectionately. Minnowpaw breathed in the sweet scent of her mother.

"And we'll have good reason for it, too," Sweetstripe put in, flicking her tail warmly over Mudpaw's ears. "We'd better get back if you want to be in time for your own ceremony," she told the brown apprentice.

"Looks like you could use some help," Flamepelt meowed to Minnowpaw, grabbing prey in his jaws. Between the six cats, they managed to carry the fish back home.

The camp was buzzing with excitement. It seemed every cat was in good spirits in anticipation of the naming ceremony; even grumpy old Blacktail was sunning himself in the clearing, chatting with Troutleap and Shadebelly. As the evening patrol, with Tawnyclaw and Minnowpaw, entered camp loaded with fresh-kill, their Clanmates crowded around them.

"Great StarClan!" Birchclaw was exclaiming, his gaze warm as he eyed Minnowpaw. "Did you leave any fish in the river?"

Ashstar emerged from his den and padded over to the fresh-kill pile as the six cats deposited the prey. "Well done," he meowed to Minnowpaw. Sorrelpaw was also heading over, her pelt slick and

glossy like she'd just finished grooming. Seeing her, Mudpaw immediately began to clean his own messy fur as well. Ashstar said, "Now that everyone is here, we can begin the ceremony."

He walked to the meeting rock and jumped onto it, opening his jaws to yowl, "Let all cats old enough to swim gather for a Clan meeting!" The call was hardly necessary, as most of the Clan was already in the clearing. Nightwhisper and Silverheart emerged from the medicine den to sit beside the elders. Maplenose brought Redkit, Poppykit, and Cinderkit out of the nursery, calling them to stay with her. She was followed more slowly by Cherryheart, whose belly was bulging with kits. The pretty she-cat went to sit beside her mate, and Nettlestep and Pebblenose joined them. Minnowpaw found Flamepelt and went to sit next to him. Shadebelly took his place next to Ashstar, looking proudly at his kits. Mudpaw and Sorrelpaw, coats gleaming, approached Ashstar, flanked by Sweetstripe and Twigtail. The camp fell silent.

"Twigtail, Sweetsripe," Ashstar began. "Are you confident that your apprentices are ready to become warriors?" The two mentors replied with a confident 'yes,' and Ashstar continued. "I, Ashstar, leader of RiverClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down upon these two apprentices. They have trained hard to learn the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as warriors in their turn."

Minnowpaw's chest tightened as she heard the words. She wondered how many naming ceremonies Ashstar had conducted, and suddenly her paws itched for her own. It wouldn't be too long now.

"Mudpaw, Sorrelpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code, and to protect and defend this Clan, even at the cost of your lives?" Ashstar gazed at the two cats.

"I do." Mudpaw's voice was trembling a little.

Sorrelpaw's mew was calmer, but with just as much pride. "I do."

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior names. Mudpaw, from this moment you will be known as Mudpelt.

StarClan honors your courage and enthusiasm, and we welcome you as a full warrior of RiverClan." He stepped forward to rest his muzzle on Mudpelt's head before turning to Sorrelpaw.

"Sorrelpaw, from this moment you will be known as Sorrelstream. StarClan honors your thoughtfulness and dedication, and we welcome you as a full warrior of RiverClan."

"Mudpelt! Sorrelstream!" The clan cheered the warriors' new names, howling praise and encouragement. Overcome with pride for her friends, Minnowpaw felt her voice was the loudest of all.

Chapter 6

"But *why* can't I come with you?" Redkit protested loudly.

Several sunrises later, Minnowpaw was preparing to leave camp with Tawnyclaw, Ashflower, and Sorrelstream for the sunhigh patrol. The late newleaf sun bore down on them, making Minnowpaw's pelt bristle uncomfortably in the heat. She was sure that greenleaf couldn't be far off.

"Because you're not an apprentice yet," Tawnyclaw explained to the young tom. Minnowpaw's mentor was trying to be calm, but Minnowpaw could see the frustration in his eyes. Redkit had been begging to come on a patrol since dawn, and wouldn't take no for an answer.

"But I'm basically an apprentice!" Redkit carried on. "My naming ceremony is today! You have to let me come with you!"

Minnowpaw's whiskers twitched with amusement. She wondered if Redkit would retain his enthusiasm when they were sharing a den. It had been lonely since Ashstar had made Mudpelt and Sorrelstream warriors. Minnowpaw had to admit that it felt strange to be the only apprentice in the den; that only brought back her worry about the growing strength of the other Clans. But she was glad that Redkit and his littermates would be joining her soon.

Sorrelstream jumped in, speaking calmly to the whining kit, "Right, but you're not an apprentice quite yet. But you also shouldn't be acting like a newborn kit, either. Trust me, there will be plenty of patrols for you." Her eyes lit up mischievously. "In fact, you'll probably be put on so many patrols that you'll be begging your mentor to let you clean out the elders' den."

Redkit scrunched his nose in disgust at the thought of changing the elders' bedding, then jumped up again. "Who do you think my mentor will be?" he asked excitedly.

The four cats shrugged together, and Tawnyclaw began padding towards the camp entrance, flicking his tail for the patrol to follow. Redkit looked crestfallen, so Minnowpaw called back to him, "Don't worry! We'll be back in time for your ceremony!"

As the patrol wove through the ferns and reeds, Ashflower joked, "I feel sorry for whoever gets Redkit as an apprentice. That tom's going to be a pawful."

"My guess is it will be one of the younger warriors," Sorrelstream meowed. Quickly she added, "I don't mean me! I'm definitely not ready for an apprentice yet."

Minnowpaw nodded, understanding what her friend meant. "Maybe Flamepelt," she suggested. "He'd have the energy to deal with Redpaw."

"He's very young," Tawnyclaw mused. "But you might be right."

The patrol paused on the WindClan border to reset the scent markers. Minnowpaw peered downstream and gulped at the sight of the gorge, where the river fell swiftly down into the depths of the rocky chasm. She could only imagine what would happen if any cat fell that far.

"You've been spending a lot of time with Flamepelt," Sorrelstream teased Minnowpaw.

"Yes, I had noticed that," Ashflower put in, nudging her daughter affectionately.

Minnowpaw flushed. It was true that Flamepelt and Minnowpaw had been on nearly every hunting and border patrol together lately, but she couldn't help the cats that Shadebelly assigned to patrols! "It's really just a coincidence," she mumbled, embarrassed. She had to admit, though, that she enjoyed the orange warrior's company.

Realizing that Sorrelstream, Ashflower, and Tawnyclaw were all staring at her in amusement, Minnowpaw pushed ahead of them. "Come on," she meowed, trying to turn the conversation away. "Let's finish the patrol!"

The RiverClan cats followed the path of the river, walking upstream to curve around the edge of their territory. They stopped to mark the boundaries again just across from Sunningrocks, and they also took the chance to lap up a few mouthfuls of the cold, clear water. Minnowpaw basked in the refreshing taste as it coated her tongue. It was a welcome comfort from the sun beating down overhead.

"Do you think we could stop to fish?" Sorrelstream asked Tawnyclaw. The gray warrior thought for a moment, then nodded.

"Just for a bit," he replied. "Then we should head back if we want to see the ceremony."

The four cats entered the river and began to hunt for the plump silver fish darting through the water. As Minnowpaw spied one, she flashed her paw into the river to scoop it own, bringing it down hard on the rocks of the bank, killing it. Droplets splattered Ashflower in her face, and she shook her whiskers.

"Thanks a lot!" she exclaimed, but she didn't look mad. Instead, she slapped the water with her forepaw and splashed Minnowpaw back. Enjoying the friendly company of her mother, Minnowpaw reached forward and dragged Ashflower into the river, purring with amusement. Sorrelstream, having been caught in the middle, joined in as well, and soon all three she-cats were soaking wet and purring loudly with laughter.

Tawnyclaw cleared his throat. "If you're done," he meowed, but his eyes were shining. It seemed every cat in RiverClan was feeling well lately.

An unamused growl sounded from the opposite bank. Minnowpaw whipped her head up to see a massive ginger tom glaring at her and her patrol from the edge of Sunningrocks. "I can see what RiverClan spends all their time doing," he mewed, his tone hostile. Minnowpaw breathed in the scent of ThunderClan and quickly backed out of the river, following Ashflower.

Tawnyclaw straightened his shoulders and stepped forward to confront the warrior. "You're dangerously close to RiverClan territory, Copperfoot," he warned.

Copperfoot snorted, kneading the warm stone with large brown paws. "Sunningrocks belongs to ThunderClan, fish-face," he spat. Unsheathing his claws, he added, "Or do I need to remind you of that?"

The fur along Minnowpaw's spine rose and she felt a growl in her throat. Was this arrogant mouse-brain really going to challenge her mentor?

But Tawnyclaw's voice remained steady as he replied, "Of course, Copperfoot. But the river belongs to us. You know we won't step foot on Sunningrocks, for now," there was a hidden challenge in his mew, "but know that if you put one paw in the river, we'll shred you."

Copperfoot took a step forward, so that the river almost lapped at his claws. "And you're so sure of that?" he challenged. "RiverClan is *weak* compared to ThunderClan, or any other Clan for that matter. Who's to stop us from taking the river as our territory?"

Minnowpaw gasped. She'd been praying to StarClan that RiverClan appeared strong to the other Clans, but clearly their weakness hadn't gone unnoticed. She braced herself; if Copperfoot wanted a fight, she'd give him one.

Ashflower stepped in front of her, mewing softly, "Easy. I doubt this mange-pelt would be mouse-brained enough to take on a full patrol on his own. He's trying to get under your pelt; don't let him." Minnowpaw let her fur lie flat again.

"RiverClan is strong," Tawnyclaw said evenly. "If you think otherwise, then you're a mouse-brained fool. Now go home; we're all wasting time here."

Copperfoot looked as if he were about to take another step, but Minnowpaw caught his eyes flashing uncertainly towards the flowing river. With a surge of triumph, she realized something. "He's scared of the water," she murmured, but her Clanmates heard her. Louder, she said, "Poor kitty doesn't want to get his fur wet."

Copperfoot snapped his head towards Minnowpaw, eyes blazing.

"Watch yourself, apprentice," he spat. Turning back toward his territory, he added over his shoulder, "Pray you never meet me in battle." He disappeared over the rocks.

Ashflower snorted in disgust. "Typical ThunderClan," she spat. "They think they're the greatest warriors in the forest."

"Right now, they just might be," Tawnyclaw muttered darkly. "Come on, let's finish this patrol and get back to camp."

"Let all cats old enough to swim gather for a Clan meeting!" Ashstar's yowl sounded around the camp, beckoning RiverClan from their dens. The sun was beginning to set, making the horizon look like fire. Minnowpaw picked absently at her water vole. Though she was hungry, she had little appetite after her patrol's encounter with Copperfoot. His threat had seemed very real, almost like he *wanted* to fight her. What kind of respectable warrior picked fights with apprentices? Minnowpaw didn't know whether to be more frightened or disgusted.

"Not hungry?" Minnowpaw looked up to see Flamepelt standing above her. His gaze was cool.

"Not really," Minnowpaw replied.

"Cheer up," Flamepelt meowed kindly. "You're about to gain some new denmates."

Nodding, Minnowpaw left the remains of her meal and walked with Flamepelt to where the Clan was gathering for the naming ceremony. They sat down together, pelts brushing. Flamepelt ran his tail comfortingly over Minnowpaw's spine, and her worries began to melt away.

Once the Clan had gathered, Ashstar began to speak. "These three kits have reached their sixth moon and are ready to become apprentices," he called. Below the meeting rock, Redkit, Cinderkit, and Poppykit were shaking with excitement, their pelts sleek and glossy, and Maplenose watched proudly from the front.

"Poppykit, from now until you earn your warrior name, you will be known as Poppypaw," Ashstar meowed. "Bristlepelt, you are ready for another apprentice. I hope you will pass on your courage and hunting skills to this apprentice." Minnowpaw's father stepped forward to touch noses with the small she-cat.

"Cinderkit," Ashstar spoke to the gray kit, "from now until you earn your warrior name, you will be known as Cinderpaw. Your mentor will be Nettlestep; Nettlestep, I hope you teach your apprentice your level-headedness and battle skills.

"And Redkit." The red tom was quivering. "From now until you earn your warrior name, you will be known as Redpaw. Flamepelt, you are ready for your first apprentice, and I trust that you will pass on everything you learned from Bristlepelt to this young cat."

Flamepelt, looking very surprised and honored, stepped forward to touch noses with Redpaw. "Redpaw! Cinderpaw! Poppypaw!" The Clan cheered for the three young cats. Minnowpaw cheered along with them, for both the apprentices and for her friend. She was glad he'd been given an apprentice, and maybe a little smug that she'd been right. But more than that, a feeling of contentedness swept over her; RiverClan was growing stronger by the day.

Chapter 7

Cherryheart had her kits in the night, nearly half a moon early. Minnowpaw woke to find the camp bustling with activity. Cloudsplash was pacing back and forth outside the nursery, while Nightwhisper and Silverheart ran back and forth between the nursery and the medicine den. Outside his own den, Ashstar had his eyes fixed on the nursery, Shadebelly at his side. Ashflower and Maplenose, who had moved back to the warriors' den, looked on with worry in their eyes. Soft groans sounded from the fern-enclosed den.

Minnowpaw padded over to her mother. "Is Cherryheart going to be okay?" she asked, feeling scared for the tortoiseshell queen.

Ashflower licked the top of Minnowpaw's head reassuringly. "Don't worry, little one," she mewed softly. "Queens have been having kits long before Cherryheart. She'll be just fine."

"Yes, I had mine early as well," Maplenose put in. "Nightwhisper and Silverheart are the best medicine cats in the forest. She'll be okay, and so will her kits." To Minnowpaw, it sounded as if Maplenose were trying to convince herself as much as Minnowpaw.

Minnowpaw couldn't bear to just stand around; she needed to do something. Walking over to the fresh-kill pile, she picked up two fish and headed over to the elders' den, where Troutleap and Blacktail were wide awake as they too watched the nursery in anticipation. "Here," she mewed, dropping the fish at the old toms' paws.

"Thanks, Minnowpaw," Troutleap meowed kindly, taking a bite of fish.

Blacktail began to eat his own fish as well. "A fresh one would be better," he grumbled.

Minnowpaw tried not to roll her eyes at the sour gray-and-black tom. Instead she said, "I'm sure Shadebelly will send out a hunting patrol soon."

Troutleap nodded thoughtfully. "Everyone's waiting for those kits," he said. "They're my kin, you know," he added to Minnowpaw.

Minnowpaw's ears pricked. "Really?"

Troutleap nodded, taking another bite. "Cherryheart is my daughter," he explained. "Dovesplash was my mate. She had our kits in leaf-bare, and Cherryheart was the only one that lived." His eyes misted over with sadness. "And then Dovesplash went to join StarClan two leaf-bares ago."

"That was the worst case of greencough I'd ever seen," Blacktail muttered. "We lost so many cats; Frostwhisker, Otternose, Featherpaw."

"And Marshkit and Rockkit," Troutleap finished sadly. Minnowpaw assumed those were the names of Cherryheart's littermates.

Minnowpaw's heart dropped at the thought of losing so many cats to such a fierce illness. It reminded her of Tawnyclaw's words by the river, when he said that Minnowpaw had yet to fight in a battle. She'd also not had to see any of her Clanmates die in her lifetime. She'd been very lucky so far, she realized, and sent a silent prayer to StarClan that she wouldn't lose any Clanmates anytime soon.

"Well, Cherryheart is strong," Minnowpaw said confidently. "I'm sure her kits will be just fine."

A moment later, Nightwhisper and Silverheart emerged from the nursery, looking as if they'd just won a battle with StarClan. Every cat in the camp angled their heads towards the two medicine cats, anticipating the news. "Cherryheart is okay," Nightwhisper called to the Clan. "And she has four beautiful, healthy kits."

Cloudsplash let out a yowl of triumph and raced into the nursery to greet his kits. Ashstar padded forward and dipped his head to Nightwhisper and Silverheart. "Good job," he mewed. "RiverClan is

truly blessed."

As the rest of the Clan looked on, Nightwhisper meowed, "It's best if we all leave her to rest for now. None of us could have kept Cloudsplash away," he added lightly, "but she is weak from the kitting and should be allowed to rest for as long as possible."

Ashstar nodded, then turned to Shadebelly. "Set up the patrols," he ordered his deputy. "And make sure the fresh-kill pile is stocked. We've several more mouths to feed now." His tone was lighter than Minnowpaw had ever heard it.

While Minnowpaw was reeling about the news- four kits!- Shadebelly began assigning cats to various patrols. "Twigtail, you can lead the dawn patrol," he mewed. "Take Sweetstripe, Nettlestep, and Cinderpaw. Birchclaw, take a hunting patrol to the river with Ashflower and Pebblenose. Bristlepelt, you can take another hunting patrol with Mudpelt and Minnowpaw."

Tawnyclaw cut in from where he sat outside the warriors' den. "Actually, I'd like to take Minnowpaw out for an assessment," he meowed, then added, "if you can spare her." Minnowpaws ears pricked. An assessment? Suddenly she was nervous.

Shadebelly dipped his head respectfully to his fellow senior warrior. "Of course, Tawnyclaw. I'm interested to see how our oldest apprentice is coming along. Sorrelstream, you can hunt instead."

Their duties all assigned, the RiverClan cats began to break up and go about their business. Minnowpaw caught a glimpse of Flamepelt and Bristlepelt leading Redpaw and Poppypaw out of camp, no doubt for training. She wondered if Flamepelt was nervous to be training his first apprentice alongside an older, more experienced warrior.

"Ready?" Tawnyclaw's voice snapped Minnowpaw to attention. She looked at him. "Sorry that it's so short-notice," he apologized, "but I think you're more than ready for your first assessment."

Minnowpaw gulped. "Are you sure? What if I mess up?"

Tawnyclaw purred. "I don't see how you could," he said warmly. His praise boosted Minnowpaw's spirits, and Tawnyclaw flicked her ear with his tail. "Come on," he said. "Even with two hunting patrols out, we could still use some more fresh-kill. Go out hunting and later I'll assess your fighting skills."

Minnowpaw nodded. "Are you coming with me?" she asked.

Tawnyclaw shook his head. "No, but I'll be watching you. Now go on, and good luck."

Minnowpaw nodded and dashed out of camp. She knew she should stay away from the other hunting patrols, so she made sure to keep clear from their scent trails. She padded softly through the ferns, listening intently for sounds of prey. While RiverClan cats weren't accustomed to catching forest prey like ThunderClan, none of them would pass up a slow mouse or pigeon. Fresh-kill was fresh-kill.

The smell of vole stopped Minnowpaw. She sniffed the air, and soon saw rustling in a bush a few tail-lengths ahead. She dropped into a crouch and slowly crept forward. The small animal jumped out of the bush, sniffing intently at the ground. It took no notice of Minnowpaw in its search for food. Minnowpaw leaped, nearly overshooting, and landed on the vole. It gave one frightened shriek before Minnowpaw killed it by biting its neck. The scent of prey bathed her tongue and her belly growled; she wished she had taken the time to eat. But she couldn't eat now, so she hid the vole in a clump of reeds and headed on towards the river.

By the time the sun had risen to the top of the sky, Minnowpaw had caught an impressive amount of prey, including a water vole and a young thrush. The cold river cooled her paws in the growing heat, and Minnowpaw stopped after a while to drink. She wondered if Tawnyclaw was watching her right now, or if he'd gone back to camp. She hoped she'd done well in her assessment; she'd be embarrassed and ashamed otherwise.

A flash of movement out of the corner of her eye caught Minnowpaw's attention. Looking up, she saw a mouse creeping out of the rocks on the other side of the river, heading towards the water. She thought for a moment. Should she go after it? It was so

close she could almost feel her claws gripping its gray body. Then she thought otherwise; it was technically on Sunningrocks, which made it ThunderClan prey. The last thing she wanted was to be caught stealing prey, especially during an assessment.

Minnowpaw began to turn away when an ear splitting screech cut through the air and a massive body landed on her back. Claws gripped her shoulders and Minnowpaw fell, her muzzle dipping below the surface of the river. Her attacker hissed viciously in her ear as it bit down, hard. Yowling, Minnowpaw struggled to get free. She managed to get loose, but felt her fur ripped away in the other cat's claws. Turning quickly, she came eye to eye with the attacker; it was Copperfoot!

"Prey-stealer!" He hissed, and launched himself at Minnowpaw again. The two grappled at each other in the water, splashing and spitting. Copperfoot was much larger, Minnowpaw noticed, and she had a hard time staying upright. She lashed at his face with unsheathed claws, managing to scratch his nose fiercely. He jumped onto her again and ripped at her flanks with his claws. Minnowpaw yowled in pain, dropping. His weight was crushing her, and she found it hard to breathe. But she couldn't let him win!

Summoning all her strength, Minnowpaw threw herself upwards, head-butting Copperfoot's belly and sending the ginger warrior flying. Not missing a moment, she leaped at him and raked her claws along his momentarily exposed belly. He stood on his hind legs, and Minnowpaw did the same. The two cats slashed and growled until Copperfoot brought his entire weight down on Minnowpaw, crushing her into the river again.

Just when Minnowpaw thought she'd never get back up again, Copperfoot's weight suddenly disappeared. A flurry of hisses and screeches sounded, and Minnowpaw pulled herself out of the water and saw Tawnyclaw grappling with Copperfoot. Her mentor had come to help her!

Minnowpaw launched herself back into the battle, fighting side-by-side with Tawnyclaw, scratching at the ThunderClan warrior's face and leaning forward to nip sharply at his legs and underside. Both

he and Minnowpaw were bleeding into the river from their various wounds, and Minnowpaw didn't know how much longer she could fight. But then Tawnyclaw shoved Copperfoot forward and out of the river, back onto his own territory.

"Go home!" he snarled, flexing his claws.

Copperfoot met Tawnyclaw's vicious stare, his flanks heaving. Drops of blood fell onto the rocks from the gash in his stomach. "Teach your *apprentice* to stay in her own territory!" he retorted.

"I was in my territory!" Minnowpaw hissed, furious. She'd never set a paw out of the river!

Tawnyclaw growled again, and for a moment Minnowpaw thought he was going to launch himself at Copperfoot again. Instead, he growled, "Go home, and thank StarClan you're walking away in one piece. Next time you won't be so lucky." Without waiting for a reply, the gray warrior turned and exited the river.

Minnowpaw followed quickly, remembering to pick up her catch before following Tawnyclaw into the reeds.

Chapter 8

Once they were out of sight of the river, Minnowpaw stopped and set her fresh-kill down. "I wasn't in ThunderClan territory, I swear!" she meowed, hoping he believed her.

Tawnyclaw paused. "I know," he answered. "That Copperfoot is looking for a fight, but I didn't think he'd ever attack an apprentice."

Minnowpaw shook her head. "I don't know why he did. I was fishing in the river. I mean, I saw a mouse on the edge of Sunningrocks, but I wasn't going to catch it! That would be breaking the warrior code."

Tawnyclaw nodded. "I know," he repeated. "I believe you. I'm just glad I got there in time."

Minnowpaw agreed. Copperfoot could have easily killed her, she thought darkly.

Tawnyclaw looked Minnowpaw up and down and said, "Let's get back to camp. You need to get your wounds taken care of. That one on your shoulder looks pretty deep."

Through her anger and the adrenaline of fighting, Minnowpaw hadn't noticed the ugly gash on her right shoulder. It was dripping heavily onto the forest floor, and she suddenly felt the weight of her pain bearing down on her. Wincing, she nodded and followed Tawnyclaw back to camp. Her mentor stopped to pick up the vole Minnowpaw had caught earlier; she'd forgotten about it.

Once back in camp, Minnowpaw and Tawnyclaw were greeted by gasps and shocked looks. Ashstar, sharing a bit of fresh-kill with Shadebelly outside his den, jumped up and rushed towards them. "What happened?" he asked sharply.

"Minnowpaw was attacked in the river by a ThunderClan warrior," Tawnyclaw explained. "He accused her of stealing prey, but she

never even set a paw on Sunningrocks."

Ashstar's gaze flicked to Minnowpaw. "Is this true?"

Minnowpaw nodded quickly.

Her leader eyed her pelt- bloody, wet, and torn- and said, "Go see Nightwhisper, quickly."

Minnowpaw headed to the medicine den, dropping off her prey on her way there. She was limping now, and once she got to the medicine den, she stumbled and fell over.

"What in StarClan's name happened to you?" Nightwhisper gasped. At the back of the den, Silverheart poked her head out from the herb stores, eyes wide as she beheld the silver apprentice.

Minnowpaw quickly explained what had happened as Nightwhisper looked her over, shaking his head the entire time. Her wound was blazing with pain. "ThunderClan," he muttered. "I can't believe a warrior would stoop so low."

Minnowpaw bared her teeth as Nightwhisper's tongue met the gash on her shoulder, clearing it of debris and already-drying blood. "I'm lucky Tawnyclaw was watching my assessment," she meowed, repeating her mentor's words. "I thought Copperfoot was going to kill me," she admitted.

"Well, it certainly seems like he tried to," Nightwhisper mewed. "This wound here is pretty deep. Silverheart, bring some marigold so I can make a poultice. And cobwebs to cover it." Looking back at Minnowpaw, he added, "The poultice will be to keep it from getting infected, and the cobwebs will stop the bleeding and help hold it shut while it heals. But I want you to check in with me everyday so I can reapply the poultice and make sure it heals okay. A wound like this could turn sour easily." Minnowpaw nodded. "And I don't want you training until it's healed," Nightwhisper finished.

Minnowpaw gaped at him. No training? What was she supposed to do? Before she could protest, Tawnyclaw's voice sounded at the entrance, "I agree, Minnowpaw. You need to heal before you get

back to your training." He entered the den, followed by Ashstar.

"Ah, Tawnyclaw," Nightwhisper meowed, eyeing his wounds. "Let me get a look at your wounds, too."

"I'm alright," Minnowpaw's mentor said. "Minnowpaw did most of the fighting." In his eyes gleamed the slightest hint of pride.

"Well, if Copperfoot's wounds are anything like Minnowpaw's," Ashstar put in lightly, "he might think twice about fighting her again." Though his tone was joking, Minnowpaw could see concern in his gaze, which she felt reflected in her. She was still bothered by the fact that Copperfoot had so viciously accused her of stealing prey, when *he* was the one who had trespassed to attack *her*.

While Nightwhisper assessed Tawnyclaw's cuts and scratches, Silverheart approached Minnowpaw with more cobwebs to dress her other minor wounds. Aside from her shoulder, Minnowpaw was bleeding from her ear, left flank, and left foreleg. As she worked, Silverheart said, "I'd like to get my claws on that ThunderClan brute."

Surprised at her ferocity, Minnowpaw's eyes widened. "Really?"

Silverheart met Minnowpaw's gaze. "I might be a medicine cat, but I don't take lightly to other cats hurting my friends. It really looks like he was trying to kill you."

Still sitting patiently at the entrance to the medicine den, Ashstar meowed, "I'm thinking about heading a patrol over to ThunderClan to speak to Duskstar about it."

"It wouldn't do any good," Tawnyclaw growled, wincing as Nightwhisper applied the marigold poultice to his flank. "They've likely already heard Copperfoot's story. They'll never believe you if you tried to tell them any different. They're all arrogant."

Nightwhisper nodded. "Yes, I'm afraid Tawnyclaw's right," he sighed. "You have the word of an apprentice against that of a respected ThunderClan warrior." Looking at Minnowpaw, he added, "No offense."

But Minnowpaw understood what he meant. "They won't believe you," she told Ashstar. "If Copperfoot believes I was trespassing, then that's all they'll care to know. I'm sure we might not see it any differently if the roles were reversed."

Ashstar sighed heavily, his gaze clouded. "It's all about Sunningrocks," he muttered. "They're so insecure about that patch of territory, ever since they won it over. It's like they can't believe we haven't tried to take it back yet, and are just waiting for us to."

Minnowpaw suddenly wondered why they hadn't. She knew that Sunningrocks had always been disputed between ThunderClan and RiverClan, and the two Clans had fought for it for moons and moons. She also knew that, when the Clans were formed, Sunningrocks belonged to RiverClan. Just like the rest of her Clanmates, Minnowpaw knew that Sunningrocks were rightful RiverClan territory.

"It's about time we took them back," Tawnyclaw meowed, echoing Minnowpaw's thoughts. "They belong to us."

But Ashstar shook his head. "Not yet," he replied evenly. "I have every intention of reclaiming Sunningrocks, but not yet. Even though Cherryheart's kits have made us feel stronger, I won't be mouse-brained enough to forget that we're outmatched by ThunderClan. I won't allow my foolishness to cost me the lives of my Clanmates." He turned and left.

"Alright, you can both go now," Nightwhisper meowed to Tawnyclaw and Minnowpaw. "And remember, Minnowpaw, no training until I say so!"

Nodding reluctantly, Minnowpaw stood and limped towards the entrance. Silverheart gave Minnowpaw an affectionate lick on her cheek, her eyes glittering with concern and pride. Minnowpaw had to admit to herself that she was proud of the way she'd fought. Her argument with Tawnyclaw about fighting skills and strategy felt moons away, and she at last understood how far she'd come, thanks to her mentor.

Still, she couldn't help but feel bummed out about not being able to

train. "So, how long do I have to be cooped up in camp?" she asked Tawnyclaw, trying not to sound whiny.

Tawnyclaw paused beside the fresh-kill pile and shrugged. "You heard Nightwhisper," he mewed. "He'll tell you when you're ready." It wasn't the answer Minnowpaw had hoped for, but she supposed it was the only one she'd get.

"How was my assessment?" she asked, suddenly remembering.

"It was great," Tawnyclaw replied, looking proud. "Even better than I thought it would be. You're becoming a great warrior, Minnowpaw."

Minnowpaw beamed with pride. "I guess even great warriors can get attacked on their own territory," she joked. "AlthoughI guess you won't be assessing my fighting skills today."

Tawnyclaw shook his head. "I saw plenty today," he reassured her. "Although the circumstances weren't great, I was still able to see how you fight, so we didn't really miss out on a battle assessment."

"And?" Minnowpaw prompted, wishing her mentor would speak just a *little* more than usual.

"And you were amazing," Tawnyclaw purred. "He had the element of surprise, but you bounced back quickly. You aimed low so you could attack without being overpowered. For being much smaller than Copperfoot, you managed to fight like a well-trained warrior. I wouldn't have gone about it any differently."

Minnowpaw straightened her shoulders, bursting with pride. The movement sent a flash of pain down her wound, and she grimaced. Tawnyclaw chuckled. "Take it easy," he reminded her. "Go on, you must be hungry." He gestured to the fresh-kill pile. "Why don't you take something to Cherryheart and see the new kits? Then go ahead and eat for yourself, and get some rest."

Minnowpaw nodded, suddenly overcome by a yawn and a crushing wave of weariness. Some food and sleep would be very welcome, she thought.

Chapter 9

Minnowpaw was ducking to pick up a fish from the fresh-kill pile when the ferns at the entrance to the camp rustled and the sunhigh patrol returned. Nettlestep led, followed by Flamepelt and their apprentices. Redpaw was proudly carrying a large vole. Flamepelt nodded to him and the young tom bounded over to the elders' den to share his kill. Flamepelt joined Minnowpaw at the fresh-kill pile, eyes widening as he beheld her pelt, scratched and slicked with poultices.

"What happened to you?" he gasped.

As Minnowpaw yet again went over her encounter with Copperfoot, Flamepelt's gaze turned angry. Minnowpaw had never seen her friend look like this, but now his fur was bristling and he raked the dirt under paw mercilessly with his claws. "What a fox-heart," he growled.

Minnowpaw nodded in agreement. "But I'm fine now," she said quickly, unnerved by the darkness in Flamepelt's golden eyes. "Tawnyclaw showed up and helped me drive him off. I've got to let this wound heal, which means no training. But I'm fine, really."

Flamepelt looked as if he wanted to say something else, but he just said, "Okay, then."

"I was just about to take some fresh-kill to Cherryheart and see the new kits," Minnowpaw explained. "Have you seen them yet?"

Flamepelt shook his head, all the malice gone from his gaze. "Not yet. I've been busy all day with Redpaw. I never thought being a mentor would be so exhausting," he admitted.

Minnowpaw flicked his ears affectionately with her tail. "Well, get used to it," she joked. "This was just day one. Come on, we can go see the kits together." Picking up the fattest fish she could find, she headed for the nursery, Flamepelt less than a tail-length behind.

The nursery was warm, filled with milk-scent that reminded Minnowpaw of her kit days. Cherryheart lay curled in the center of it, four tiny kits suckling at her belly. Ashflower sat behind Cherryheart, stroking the queen's flank with her tail. Both she-cats looked up as Minnowpaw and Flamepelt entered.

"I brought this for you," Minnowpaw said softly, not wanting to disturb the precious bundles.

"Thank you so much," Cherryheart purred, immediately taking a bite. "I've never been so hungry in my life!" Though exhausted, her gaze was soft and happy.

"Shouldn't you be resting?" Ashflower said to Minnowpaw, looking concerned. The whole Clan probably knew about the fight by now.

Minnowpaw shrugged. "I couldn't wait to see the kits," she explained. Although her shoulder was screaming in pain, and she felt as though her paws wouldn't hold her up much longer, the sight of the kits was giving her a new strength. "They look so perfect," she breathed, and stepped aside so Flamepelt could get a better look. The orange tom purred softly at the sight of them.

Ashflower was watching the two cats with an unreadable look in her eyes, equal parts fondness, mischief, and something else Minnowpaw couldn't quite place.

"Have you given them names yet?" Flamepelt asked, to which Cherryheart nodded.

"Yes, Cloudsplash and I named them this morning," she meowed. "This one is Specklekit," she gestured to the little tortoiseshell she-kit. Next were two black-and-white kits, one tom and one she-kit. "The tom is Breezekit, and the she-kit is Reedkit. And the gray tom is Beechkit." Her gaze was loving as she looked at them.

"Those names are wonderful," Minnowpaw mewed, then let out a massive yawn.

Ashflower stood and crossed the den, licking Minnowpaw affectionately on the top of her head. "You need to get some rest,"

she meowed seriously. "That wound has to heal properly." Her tone grew darker as she muttered, "If only I could go to ThunderClan and get my claws on that tom myself."

Flamepelt and Cherryheart were nodding at Ashflower's words. It seemed the entire Clan wanted to shred Copperfoot on Minnowpaw's behalf! Minnowpaw had to admit that she wanted to finish that fight as well. Rage began to burn in her mind, but was quickly drowned out by overwhelming weariness.

Ashflower began to nudge Minnowpaw out of the nursery. "Go rest now," she pushed. "You can come see the kits again later." She looked at Flamepelt and added mischievously, "You leave her to rest, okay?"

Flamepelt cocked his head and replied awkwardly, "Okay."

Minnowpaw was herded into the apprentice's den by her mother. She curled deeply into her nest while Ashflower groomed her ears softly. Under the gentle lapping of her mother's tongue, Minnowpaw fell into a deep sleep.

A quarter moon passed and Minnowpaw spent most of it bound to the camp, growing bored with every passing day. She itched to be training with Tawnyclaw again, but Nightwhisper kept telling her that her wound wasn't healed enough. "It has to be fully closed, or you'll risk opening it again and having to start the healing process all over," he had told her. Reluctantly, Minnowpaw knew he was right.

To pass the time and stay useful to her Clanmates, Minnowpaw took care of the elders every day, much to the joy of her denmates. Minnowpaw had come to enjoy the company of Redpaw, Cinderpaw, and Poppypaw, though they were much louder than Mudpelt and Sorrelstream had been. But they always wanted to show Minnowpaw their newly learned fighting moves, and Redpaw had begun to ask her every day if she could join his training sessions.

"Sorry, Redpaw," she always said. "I have to stay in camp until this wound heals."

Minnowpaw had also been visiting Cherryheart and the kits everyday. Specklekit, Breezekit, Reedkit, and Beechkit were growing stronger everyday, and now their eyes were fully open and they were roaming the entire nursery. Cherryheart had recovered from her stressful kitting as well, and was finally able to leave the nursery for her own fresh-kill or to use the dirtplace without being accompanied by Minnowpaw or Ashflower, who spent an unusual amount of time with the tortoiseshell queen.

Now, Minnowpaw was finishing up her job of removing Troutleap's and Blacktail's ticks. She held a piece of mouse bile-soaked moss between her paws, pressing it to each tick until it let go. The smell was vile, and Minnowpaw scrunched up her nose as she listened to Troutleap telling a story about the time Ashstar had fought a dog from the Twoleg farm just outside RiverClan territory.

"He was Ashfoot then," Troutleap explained to Minnowpaw as she struggled with a stubborn tick on Blacktail's hind leg. "He was deputy to Willowstar. Every other cat was scared out of their pelts, but Ashstar sent that dog running home, tail tucked and screeching. No one could ever challenge his right to be deputy after that, even though he was young."

Minnowpaw enjoyed the story, picturing her gray leader as a young warrior, brave and determined to protect his Clan. She could see remnants of the cat he'd once been when she saw him everyday, and supposed the only quality of the story that had left him was his youth.

At last, the tick gave way and Minnowpaw stepped back. "There you go, Blacktail. All your ticks are gone."

Blacktail grumbled a thanks, and Troutleap flicked his denmate's ears with his tail, eyes flashing was amusement. "You know, one day you might appreciate this apprentice," he joked. "You might be in StarClan by then, though." Minnowpaw chuckled, and turned away from the two toms with the bile-soaked moss on a piece of bark between her teeth.

She met Nightwhisper just outside his den. "You can bury that at the dirtplace," he instructed her. "Then you can wash your paws off

in the river."

"The river?" Minnowpaw pricked her ears hopefully. She was finally allowed to leave camp.

"Be careful," Nightwhisper cautioned her. "Take your time getting there and back, and let Tawnyclaw go with you." Minnowpaw could see her mentor sharing tongues with Birchclaw and Twigtail, and he whipped his head up as he heard his name.

Minnowpaw nodded. "Yes, Nightwhisper," she meowed.

On the way to the river, Minnowpaw's shoulder ached more than she thought it would. She bared her teeth and fought with every step. Pain shot through her, making her more angry than anything. It took them what felt like ages to finally reach the water.

As she stood in the river and let the flowing water wash the mouse bile off her paws, Minnowpaw growled, "Sitting in camp has only made me weaker."

Tawnyclaw looked at her understandingly. He sat on the riverbank and curled his tail around his paws. "I know it feels that way," he mewed, "but no matter what, you have to heal."

Minnowpaw fought the urge to hiss. "But I'm exhausted just from walking here!" she protested. "By the time Nightwhisper lets me start training again, Redpaw, Cinderpaw, and Poppypaw will be way ahead of me!"

Tawnyclaw shook his head. "I promise they won't be," he said gently. "And besides that, would you rather be patient and heal properly, or not heal right and risk never being a warrior at all?"

His words froze Minnowpaw to the spot as she understood the possibility of what would happen if she rushed things. Reluctantly, she had to admit that he was right. "That doesn't mean I enjoy sitting around camp all day, being useless," she muttered, stepping out of the river.

Tawnyclaw's whiskers twitched. They began to walk back to camp. "You're not useless," he assured her. "I think Troutleap and Blacktail

are going to miss seeing you so often when you're training again. And I know Cherryheart appreciates the help; four kits are a lot to handle."

Minnowpaw shrugged. She couldn't imagine Blacktail missing her presence, and she knew Cherryheart had Ashflower with her nearly all the time. But she just said, "I guess so."

Voices coming from up ahead told Minnowpaw that they were nearing the training area. As they stepped into the little clearing, Minnowpaw saw Redpaw and Poppypaw wrestling in the center, with Flamepelt and Bristlepelt looking on. "Can we stay and watch?" Minnowpaw asked Tawnyclaw, who replied with a nod. Minnowpaw was excited to see her denmates' progress, and to feel like she was a part of apprentice training again.

Minnowpaw studied their moves. Redpaw was confident as he stood on his back legs and brought his weight down on his sister. Poppypaw looked more unsure of herself, but she kicked up and caught Redpaw in the stomach, sending him flying off her. They clashed back together in a flurry of paws and tails until Bristlepelt called for them to stop.

"Very good," Minnowpaw's father praised them. "Poppypaw, remember to assert yourself more. An enemy warrior will know if you're scared or nervous and will take advantage of that."

"But I don't want to hurt him!" Poppypaw protested, gesturing to Redpaw with her tail.

Redpaw batted Poppypaw's ears with a paw. "Just pretend I'm that mangy ThunderClan warrior," he said jokingly.

Minnowpaw let out a purr at her denmate's enthusiasm. Flamepelt stepped forward to his apprentice and meowed, "It was good that you used your size against Poppypaw, but remember to stay balanced. It won't matter how much bigger you are than your opponent if they can still knock you over."

Minnowpaw's heart ached to join the session, but her shoulder ached even more, so she didn't bother asking. She knew it was a

bad idea anyway.

"And remember," Tawnyclaw cut in from beside her, his voice rumbling, "if your opponent gains the advantage, always go for weaker spots." He looked down at Minnowpaw. "What are the weaker spots, Minnowpaw?"

Minnowpaw was caught off guard for a second, then quickly replayed her fight with Copperfoot in her head. What had she aimed for when he overpowered her? "Belly, legs, and face," she meowed confidently. Tawnyclaw and Bristlepelt nodded approvingly. Flamepelt's eyes shone, clearly just now noticing Minnowpaw's and Tawnyclaw's presence.

"We should get back to camp," Bristlepelt said. "You two need to rest before the Gathering." He nodded to Redpaw and Poppypaw.

Minnowpaw had completely forgotten that tonight was the full moon. As she followed Bristlepelt back to camp, she asked Tawnyclaw, "Can I go to the Gathering?"

The gray warrior hesitated. "That's not up to me," he said finally. "Nightwhisper will decide if you're fit enough, and Ashstar will make the final decision."

It wasn't the answer Minnowpaw had been hoping for, but it was better than being told no. Silently, the group of cats returned to camp.

In the clearing, Minnowpaw's Clanmates were casually sharing tongues over fresh-kill. Troutleap and Blacktail were snoozing beneath the warm newleaf sun, and Cherryheart was even outside the nursery. Tawnyclaw headed straight for the medicine den, beckoning Minnowpaw to follow.

Nightwhisper was not there. Instead, the two cats were greeted by Silverheart. The silver tabby's cheerful expression quickly faded to concern. "Your shoulder isn't bothering you, is it?" she mewed, immediately bounding forward to sniff at Minnowpaw's wound.

"No, it's fine," Minnowpaw said. "I mean, it's sore, but that's about it.

I think walking to the river and back was good for it."

Silverheart sighed. "That's good news," she meowed, brightening back up. "So what can I help you two with?"

Tawnyclaw was watching the medicine cat apprentice, his gaze unreadable. "We want Nightwhisper's opinion on whether or not Minnowpaw can attend the Gathering tonight," he said awkwardly. Minnowpaw wondered if he felt bad about asking for Nightwhisper's opinion over Silverheart's.

But if Silverheart was offended, it didn't show. She just said, "Well, Nightwhisper is out collecting horsetail now. But I can take a look at it." For a few moments, Silverheart poked and prodded Minnowpaw's shoulder and had the apprentice work through some strange exercises. Her muscles strained and groaned with her movements, but Minnowpaw was glad that nothing hurt sharply, and the wound showed no sign of reopening.

At last, Silverheart stepped back, relief showing on her pretty face. "Yes, I see no reason why you can't go," she said cheerfully. "In fact, that kind of exercise should be good preparation for getting back to your training. As long as you take it easy on the way there and back, it should be fine. And that means no fighting ThunderClan warriors!" she added, but Minnowpaw could tell she was only half-joking. Dipping her head in thanks, Minnowpaw followed Tawnyclaw out of the medicine den.

A few moments later, Ashstar emerged from his den and leaped onto the meeting rock, calling his Clan to assemble. The sun had fully set and the first stars in Silverpelt were visible high above the flaming horizon. "We will be leaving for the Gathering soon!" he called. "Shadebelly, Bristlepelt, Twigtail, Tawnyclaw, Pebblenose, Sorrelstream, Flamepelt, Redpaw, and Poppypaw will be going," he announced, and Minnowpaw's heart sunk as she realized he hadn't called her name. That was, until he added, looking at her, "And Minnowpaw, if you're fit, I'd like you there as well."

Tawnyclaw nodded beside Minnowpaw. "Silverheart says she's fit enough to travel."

Ashstar looked pleased. "Very well. All of you, make sure to eat and rest, and then we'll be going."

Chapter 10

Minnowpaw's wound ached the entire way to Fourtrees. It felt as if it were on fire, but she held her tongue; she didn't want anyone to think she was weak, and she certainly didn't want Ashstar sending her back to camp. As long as it wasn't bleeding, she decided, she'd bear it.

Dark clouds were moving across the sky, promising rain. They blotted out most of Silverpelt, but to Minnowpaw's relief the moon remained clear and bright. She couldn't imagine the Clans angering their warrior ancestors during a truce.

Minnowpaw marched beside Sorrelstream and Flamepelt. Her friends flanked her on either side, wordlessly offering support when she began to fall behind. Minnowpaw was thankful for them, and glad that they did not mention how much she was struggling over the rocks of the forest. Once they crossed the stepping stones to the other side of the river, the going was easy all the way to the hollow.

Only ShadowClan was present at Fourtrees when RiverClan arrived. Minnowpaw immediately spotted Icepaw's white pelt among the gathered cats and went to join her and her brother, Snakepaw. Sorrelstream and Flamepelt followed, clearly not bothered by hanging out with apprentices.

"Hey," Icepaw mewed coolly as Minnowpaw and her friends approached.

Minnowpaw dipped her head in greeting. "How's the prey running?" she asked, trying to sound friendly.

Icepaw raised a forepaw and gave it a lick. "Fine, thanks. And you?"

"Very well, thank you."

"Hi, Sorrelpaw," Snakepaw greeted. "Mudpaw didn't come?"

The pale warrior shook her head. "No. And it's Sorrel*stream* now," she said proudly. "And Mudpelt."

The two ShadowClan apprentices congratulated Sorrelstream. Just then, a wave of ThunderClan scent rolled over the hollow, and Minnowpaw looked back to see Duskstar standing atop the ridge at the edge of ThunderClan territory. He swiftly led his cats down to the Gathering and headed for Ashstar and Tanglestar, who sat beneath the Great Rock. The rest of ThunderClan dispersed among the other cats, exchanging friendly mews. Minnowpaw's group was joined by a ThunderClan apprentice. His fur was striped with gray and silver, and all four of his paws were white.

"Hey, Rainpaw!" Sorrelstream greeted him.

The tom muttered a half-hearted greeting, and Minnowpaw could tell he looked sad. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"Mind your own business, *apprentice,*" came a sneer from behind. Minnowpaw spun and met the unfriendly gaze of Copperfoot. Minnowpaw bristled, and Flamepelt and Sorrelstream stood, their tails beginning to bush out. Minnowpaw said nothing.

Copperfoot's expression turned to smugness. "There you go, you're getting better already," he said, sticking his nose up in the air. "Maybe your mentor can do something right after all. Where is that fleabag?"

Minnowpaw felt a growl rising in her throat, and she flexed her claws. No one insulted Tawnyclaw! She'd show this mouse-heart not to mess with them!

"I'm right here," came a calm voice from behind Copperfoot. Tawnyclaw padded past him to stand beside Minnowpaw and her friends, flashing them a warning look to calm them down, then faced Copperfoot. "You seem to have a bad habit of running into my apprentice," he said, his voice cold as ice. "You'd better thank StarClan for the truce; otherwise I'd be tempted to rip your pelt off right here and now." The threat hung thickly in the air between the two toms, and Minnowpaw felt a rush of pride for her mentor.

Copperfoot snorted. "You RiverClan cats are so arrogant!"

"Says him," Icepaw muttered, and Minnowpaw fought back a purr of amusement.

Copperfoot clearly didn't hear the apprentice's remark, for he just said, "One day you'll all respect me." With that, he turned and padded away. Once he was gone, Tawnyclaw left as well, and Minnowpaw felt embarrassed. Her mentor had come to rescue her from the oafish ThunderClan warrior *twice* now!

Icepaw watched Copperfoot's tail disappear in the crowd of cats. WindClan had arrived at last, and they were joined once again by Yellowpaw and Sparrowpaw. "Who does he think he is?" she scoffed. "What kind of fox-hearted excuse for a warrior picks a fight with an apprentice?" Snapping her head to Minnowpaw, she added, "No offense."

Minnowpaw shrugged. "None taken." She decided that she liked this cat. "How do you think I got this shoulder wound?" She flicked her ears towards it.

Snakepaw's yellow eyes widened. "No!" he gasped. "You don't mean..."

Flamepelt nodded gravely. "She does," he said flatly.

Icepaw was shaking her head, then looked at Rainpaw. The ThunderClan apprentice had been completely silent, his head hung low and his eyes facing the ground. "How can you even stand to be in the same Clan as him?" she scoffed.

Rainpaw didn't meet her eyes as he hesitated, then said, "Well, he's my mentor."

Sorrelstream was only half paying attention as she watched the Clan leaders gather on the Great Rock, but her distracted gaze was confused. "Huh? I thought Sandstripe was your mentor," she said, naming ThunderClan's brave, level-headed deputy.

Just then, Tanglestar yowled to gain everyone's attention and to signal the start of the Gathering. Duskstar immediately stepped

forward, not allowing the other three leaders a chance to speak first. "Four sunrises ago," he began, his voice carrying across the cats in the hollow, "one of our patrols was chasing a group of ShadowClan cats off our territory."

Minnowpaw looked sideways at Icepaw and Snakepaw, but the two apprentices were staring straight ahead, looking almost guilty.

Duskstar went on, his voice sounding a little strained. "During the chase, our deputy, Sandstripe, was struck and killed by a monster on the Thunderpath." A collective gasp rose from the gathered cats.

Ashstar's voice spoke up. "RiverClan mourns your loss; Sandstripe was a good and noble cat, and we wish him happy hunting in StarClan." Below, the RiverClan cats nodded in unison. Minnowpaw realized then why Rainpaw was so sad; he'd lost his mentor. And to top it off, his new mentor was Copperfoot. Did that mean...

Minnowpaw's thoughts were cut short as Duskstar continued speaking. "ThunderClan's new deputy is Copperfoot." Mews rippled across the clearing, some shocked, some pleased, and some in protest. Minnowpaw could tell she wasn't the only one who didn't like Copperfoot. The arrogant warrior who'd taunted and attacked her was now ThunderClan's deputy! Looking ahead, Minnowpaw saw the tom staring back, his eyes gleaming. He was looking at *her!*

Featherstar was the next to speak. Her pelt looked ruffled, and her eyes were tired. "WindClan has suffered as well. A half moon ago, one of our apprentices found a new badger set on the moors, and I led a patrol to drive the badger off. During the fight, Russetclaw and Sandpaw were badly injured, and one of our warriors, Whitefoot, was killed." Murmurs of sadness and shock sounded through the Clans.

Minnowpaw could hardly believe it. "That must have been one fierce badger!" she breathed.

"It was," Yellowpaw muttered in reply, her eyes dark. "Featherstar lost a life fighting it."

Sparrowpaw slapped his tail over his denmate's mouth to silence

her, and Minnowpaw knew that that sort of information was unwise to share with enemy Clans.

Featherstar was still speaking. "But as for better news," she beckoned two cats forward who were sitting close to the rock. "Our medicine cat, Morningwish, and her apprentice, Beechpaw, traveled to Highstones with the other medicine cats at the half moon, and Beechpaw was welcomed by StarClan as a full medicine cat. She has been granted the name of Beechnose."

A cacophony of cheering filled the hollow, and Minnowpaw saw Nightwhisper looking beyond thrilled. Minnowpaw knew that medicine cats had strange and sacred ties to their warrior ancestors that went beyond clan loyalties.

Tanglestar was next to speak. "ShadowClan also mourns the death of Sandstripe, and we wish the circumstances had been different," he meowed, sounding almost solemn. However, there was a glint of hostility in his eyes. At least he wasn't denying that ShadowClan cats had crossed the border. "Recently, one of our cats brought back a piece of poisoned prey. It was not from Carrionplace, so we aren't sure why it was poisoned. All the same, two of our apprentices have been ill and have still not returned to training."

"Tallpaw and Whitepaw," Icepaw muttered. Minnowpaw was surprised that all three clans were being so open about their sudden weaknesses. She guessed that if they all knew they had been weakened, no clan was in danger of attack. But RiverClan had been prosperous over the last moon! Minnowpaw hoped Ashstar wouldn't dwell too much on that when he spoke.

"Our medicine cat, Whitewhisker, assures me that it's not a sign from StarClan," Tanglestar finished.

At last, Ashstar stepped forward. "RiverClan has named two new warriors, Mudpelt and Sorrelstream," he announced. "And three new apprentices: Redpaw, Cinderpaw, and Poppypaw!" RiverClan cheered loudly. "Also, Cherryheart has given birth to four kits, and we thank StarClan that they are all healthy and strong!"

"So we're all suffering somehow, and RiverClan is still growing

stronger?" a voice challenged from below. Minnowpaw didn't know who it was.

Ashstar eyed the cat. "If you'll remember, RiverClan was the smallest of the four clans at the last Gathering. These kits are a blessing to us."

Another voice yowled, "So is StarClan blessing you and punishing us?"

Featherstar stepped forward. "That's enough, Wasptail," she silenced the cat Minnowpaw recognized as her deputy. "Our misfortune is not the result of StarClan's anger; it is just part of life. Furthermore, we all know the joy of bringing new kits into our Clans; it is a blessing. WindClan shares your joy." She tipped her head to Ashstar. "StarClan is punishing no one."

To Minnowpaw's surprise, the cats began to break up, but Ashstar quickly called them back. "Wait! There is one more thing I'd like to say." Minnowpaw's heart skipped a beat; she knew what was coming.

Tanglestar snorted, flicking his tail impatiently. "What is it? Make it quick, Ashstar."

Ashstar nodded, then came eye-to-eye with Duskstar. He said, loud enough for the entire Gathering to hear, "I must say I'm surprised with your choice of deputy, Duskstar."

"What do you mean?" Duskstar growled defensively. The ThunderClan cats stood, hackles raised. They looked ready to fight on their new deputy's behalf.

Ashstar didn't flinch. "A quarter moon ago, a RiverClan apprentice had an encounter with Copperfoot at the river. What he was doing so close to the border, and on his own, is none of my concern. But what *does* concern me is that he crossed the border to attack our apprentice."

Duskstar hissed. "That's a load of mouse-dung!" he spat. Minnowpaw saw him unsheathe his claws. Around the hollow,

ShadowClan and WindClan were watching Copperfoot and Ashstar, clearly trying to decide if Ashstar was speaking the truth. Ahead, Copperfoot was bristling, and ThunderClan cats were glaring menacingly at RiverClan warriors. "Maybe you should be teaching your apprentices to mind the borders," Duskstar hissed.

Ashstar narrowed his eyes, but to Minnowpaw's surprise he remained calm. "Our apprentices seem to mind the borders better than your warriors do," he retorted. Tension thickened the air between ThunderClan and RiverClan. Minnowpaw's Clanmates stood tall around her, unafraid, so she did as well. Ashstar went on, "It is none of my business how you run your Clan. But when it comes to naming a new deputy, I would have chosen a more honorable cat." With a flick of his tail, he jumped down from the Great Rock. "This Gathering is over."

Minnowpaw turned her head to the sky. The storm clouds had thickened, but the moon was still clear. She walked to Ashstar with Flamepelt close beside her, and ThunderClan parted to let them through, hissing low threats as they passed. Copperfoot intercepted the RiverClan cats and came face-to-face with Minnowpaw, so close his whiskers touched hers. "You better watch yourself," he growled. Minnowpaw did not back down, and instead stared back into his eyes without fear. She wouldn't let this cat get the best of her!

In an instant, Tawnyclaw was next to her. "We're leaving," he growled coldly to Copperfoot. The ginger warrior stepped out of the way, snarling.

On the way back to camp, no cat spoke a word.

Chapter 11

When the storm finally broke, it rained for three days straight. Tempers were high in RiverClan in the wake of the Gathering, and every cat was on edge. After the second day, the Clan was forced to move a little farther uphill. Cherryheart brought her four kits into the apprentices' den with Minnowpaw, Redpaw, Cinderpaw, and Poppypaw. Ashstar moved into the warriors' den, and Nightwhisper and Silverheart made a makeshift den near the apprentices' den, bringing many of their herbs with them in leaf and birch bark wraps. Hunting and border patrols returned to camp sodden and short-tempered, and every crack of thunder in the sky reflected the RiverClan cats' internal anger.

Minnowpaw's feelings jumbled together as the days passed. She was as angry as the rest of her Clan, perhaps more, that Duskstar refused to believe that Copperfoot had attacked her. Any ThunderClan cat at the Gathering could see her wounds! Additionally, she was growing ever more worried about the potential threat from ThunderClan, including Copperfoot's direct threat to her.

You better watch yourself...

ShadowClan and WindClan were on her mind as well. Even though Featherstar hadn't felt threatened by RiverClan's prosperity, she couldn't exactly speak for all of her cats. The other three Clans believed that RiverClan was being blessed while they were punished by StarClan. Minnowpaw feared that there was a battle on the horizon.

In the meantime, she remained confined to camp. The weather had made her muscles even more sore, to the point that she limped with every step and could hardly walk around the entirety of the camp without having to stop due to weariness or pain. Silently, she cursed Copperfoot. Now she would be even more behind in her training.

Laying in her nest, she grumbled, "At this point, my denmates will be warriors before me." Right now, the three littermates were all

out on patrols or training. Beside her, Cherryheart and her kits were dozing.

A head poked into the den; it was Ashflower. "Keep your head up," her mother mewed softly. "This rain is just making your wound act up. I don't think going all the way to the Gathering helped, either. You'll be better in no time."

Minnowpaw wanted to believe Ashflower, but she was finding it hard to share her mother's optimism. Ashflower laid down beside Minnowpaw and began to groom her daughter's fur with quick, smooth strokes. Between the rasping of Ashflower's tongue and the pattering of rain in the forest outside, Minnowpaw almost fell asleep.

Then Ashflower's licking stopped. Minnowpaw raised her head to look at her mother. The silver tabby was staring thoughtfully at Minnowpaw. Was something wrong?

Then, with no warning, Ashflower murmured, "I'll be moving to the nursery soon."

Minnowpaw gaped at her mother, shocked by the news. "Really? Does Bristlepelt know?"

Her mother shook her head. "I wanted you to be the first to know. I wasn't sure how you'd react."

Minnowpaw scrambled upright, the movement strained and awkward. "I think it's great!" she meowed, brushing her muzzle against Ashflower's. Her mother purred loudly, and Minnowpaw's heart jumped. She was going to have siblings!

Cherryheart lifted her head, eyes glowing. "That's wonderful, Ashflower," the queen purred. Her kits were waking, too.

"Yay!" Beechkit squeaked. "We're going to have denmates!" He leaped up and jumped at Minnowpaw, landing clumsily on her back. During the time they'd spent sharing a den, Minnowpaw had grown closer to the four kits.

"How long?" Specklekit mewed, less energetically than her brother.

Ashflower prodded the tortoiseshell kit playfully with a paw. "Not for another couple moons," she answered.

Specklekit looked disappointed. But before she could say anything, she let out a massive sneeze that knocked her backwards. Her siblings yelped in surprise.

"Specklekit's sick!" Reedkit exclaimed.

"Should I go get Nightwhisper?"Breezekit offered. The little black and white tom was already headed for the entrance to the den, but Cherryheart called him back.

"*I'll* go get Nightwhisper," she said sternly. "You four should stay out of the rain! You played outside all day yesterday; I wouldn't be surprised if you all got sick!" Her tail twitching in annoyance, she left the apprentice's den.

The four kits, not disheartened at all, leaped over to Minnowpaw. "Let's play, Minnowpaw!" Beechkit mewed. "We'll be warriors, and you can be a ThunderClan warrior!" Before Minnowpaw could protest, the gray kit launched himself at Minnowpaw, his siblings following. Their tiny claws pricked her pelt and her shoulder groaned, but she fell over and pretended to be defeated.

"Die, you mangy mouse-breath!" Specklekit squealed before sneezing again.

"Yeah, and don't even think of attacking our apprentices again!" Reedkit added, batting at Minnowpaw's muzzle with her little paws.

"Oh no, I've been defeated!" Minnowpaw called dramatically. "I never should have underestimated these brave, strong RiverClan warriors!" The four kits squealed in delight. Though they were happy and playful, their words stung Minnowpaw. Even kits weren't deaf to the dishonorable actions of Copperfoot. The worry that had gripped her heart dug its icy claws in even harder.

She was relieved when Cherryheart returned, followed by Nightwhisper, carrying a bundle of leaves. "Come on, Specklekit," Cherryheart ordered her daughter. "Let Nightwhisper take a look at

you."

Nervously, Specklekit stepped forward. After sniffing her all over, Nightwhisper declared, "Just as I thought. You've just caught a cold, no doubt from playing in the rain all day!" As if in response, Specklekit sneezed again. Nightwhisper pushed a few of the leaves forward with a paw. "Here, eat these," he told the little kit. "It's feverfew; it'll clear up your cold."

Specklekit lapped up a leaf, her face screwing up in disgust. "It's yucky!" she spat.

Cherryheart looked unsympathetic. "It's going to help you get better!" she said firmly. "Now eat it!"

Beside Minnowpaw, Beechkit sneezed too. Nightwhisper's eyes widened. "Great StarClan, does everyone here have a cold?" Minnowpaw couldn't help but purr with amusement. Nightwhisper sighed and said, "Here, all four of you should eat some." He passed out feverfew to the other three kits. "That was the last of my supply; I'll have to send Silverheart for more tomorrow. With all this rain, it will be a miracle if more cats don't get sick."

Chapter 12

In the morning, Minnowpaw was surprised to hear that Nightwhisper wanted her to help Silverheart gather more feverfew. "It'll be good exercise for you," he mewed to Minnowpaw as they stood in the entrance to the medicine den, "and I don't want her going alone. I still don't trust ThunderClan."

"Don't you want to go with her?" Minnowpaw asked.

Nightwhisper shook his head. "No, I have other duties to attend to. Silverheart knows what she's doing; I just want her to have a couple warriors with her. Tawnyclaw can go as well."

Minnowpaw's mentor had just arrived, and Silverheart was slipping gracefully out of the herb store at the back of the den. Tawnyclaw dipped his head to her. "Good morning," she mewed cheerfully to the pair of them. "Ready to go?"

"Yes," Minnowpaw replied, feeling glad that she could exercise a bit. The rain had stopped early in the evening the day before, giving way to a cool night and now, a beautiful clear morning. Her paws itched to get going as the trio padded across camp to the entrance; she was one step closer to getting back to training; she could feel it.

Flamepelt and Redpaw were sitting at the entrance and greeted the group as they approached. "Good morning," Flamepelt said, his mew friendly. "Herb collecting?"

Silverheart nodded. "Feverfew. The kits all decided to get colds, so we ran out." Her eyes gleamed with amusement.

"We're just waiting on Nettlestep and Cinderpaw for training," Flamepelt explained.

"*Battle* training!" Redpaw corrected, eyes bright with excitement.

Flamepelt rolled his eyes at his apprentice, purring. "Don't let us

keep you," he said kindly to the patrol, who then began to exit camp. On the way out, Flamepelt licked Minnowpaw's ear and said, "Be careful."

Her fur feeling warm, Minnowpaw joined Tawnyclaw and Silverheart. Her mentor's gaze was half-amused. He turned to Silverheart and said awkwardly, "Lead the way." He followed the medicine cat apprentice a tail-length behind, saying nothing. Minnowpaw was glad to see that she was able to keep stride with her mentor, but the awkward silence was killing her.

"So where does feverfew grow?" she asked Silverheart.

The silver tabby said over her shoulder, "It grows best close to water, so we'll head straight for the river. There's usually a great supply this close to greenleaf. I just hope it hasn't been damaged by all the rain."

"We'll have to be careful of the river," Tawnyclaw warned, his voice low. "It's flooded over its banks and is running very quickly."

As they neared the river, the sound of the rushing water hit Minnowpaw's ears and she gasped. How full was it? Her question was answered as she, Tawnyclaw, and Silverheart stepped out of the foliage and up to the river bank. The sight of it stopped Minnowpaw in her tracks; it was flowing with the speed of a rabbit on the moors, and was flowing two tail-lengths over the bank! She gulped. RiverClan cat or not, she'd never swim in that kind of water.

Tawnyclaw growled. "Being that full, it'll be much harder to fish."

"Or find my herbs," Silverheart put in. But her expression brightened as she said, "Let's head farther downstream; there's sure to be some feverfew somewhere!"

The three cats walked along the pebbles on the outer bank, keeping clear of the bulging river. Even then, the water lapped at their paws. Thick white foam was churning up against the edges of the river, proof of the force behind its flow. They passed the stepping stones, or where the stepping stones should have been, and saw

only deep, dark water.

Silverheart grunted in frustration. "The river's too flooded," she meowed hopelessly. "If there were any good plants, they've been washed away by now."

Tawnyclaw brushed her flank reassuringly with his tail. "Let's keep looking," he encouraged her. "Like you said, there's bound to be some somewhere." He headed on downstream, and Silverheart and Minnowpaw followed.

After a while, Silverheart exclaimed, "Oh, no!" She rushed to the edge of the river, water swirling up around her paws.

"What is it?" Minnowpaw was at her side immediately, Tawnyclaw on the other.

Silverheart flicked her tail towards something moving around in the water, where the bank was beneath the swirling current. "That's feverfew, and it looks intact, but it's under the water. I don't think I can get to it."

Minnowpaw studied the fast-rippling water and finally saw a plant under it, still rooted to the ground but being pulled to the side by the current. It was nearly two tail-lengths into the water. Surely she *could* reach it. Minnowpaw began to take a step forward, but Tawnyclaw said, "Wait. That water is deeper than it looks, and faster. Maybe this isn't a great idea." His eyes held concern.

Silverheart looked despaired. "I don't know where else we're going to find feverfew," she meowed.

Minnowpaw sighed, unsure. "How bad do we need it? I mean, colds can be fought without herbs, can't they?"

Silverheart looked Minnowpaw in the eyes. Her gaze was dark and full of confusion and emotion. "You're right," she said slowly. "Maybe I'm being irrational, but something tells me that I *need* to get feverfew. I'm not sure why, but something is telling me not to go back to camp without it."

Cocking his head, Tawnyclaw thought for a few moments. At last he

said softly, "Okay, we'll get it. But maybe I should do it, Minnowpaw," he added to his apprentice.

Minnowpaw gritted her teeth. Did every cat in RiverClan see her as a liability because of a single wound? "I'm fine!" she protested. "I can get it!"

Tawnyclaw looked as if he might argue with her. His eyes passed between Minnowpaw and Silverheart. He dipped his head and said, "Okay. But be careful, and quick."

Minnowpaw stepped into the water. It was freezing cold and tugged at her paws. Gulping, she realized Tawnyclaw was right; it *was* faster than it looked. She waded deeper, a tail-length into the overflow. The current grew stronger with every slow step Minnowpaw made, and soon the water was halfway up her legs, but she had reached the feverfew. Grappling at it with her claws, Minnowpaw was able to grasp a few stems and fling them onto the bank. Silverheart's eyes flashed gratefully. "Thank you, Minnowpaw!"

Tawnyclaw's gaze was grim. "Come on, Minnowpaw. That should be enough. Get out of there."

Minnowpaw shook her head. "There's only a few more!" she called over the rush of the water. Indeed there was only a small clump left. She reached for it, but as she did, a rock beneath her paws gave way and she slipped, tumbling head-first into the water.

Her muzzle went under and, without being able to steady herself, Minnowpaw found herself being carried into the river! The shock of the water took her breath away, but she managed to reach her head out of the water. With a gasp, she realized that she was already several fox-lengths away from her mentor and Silverheart! They were calling out to her as they began to race along the bank after her. But Minnowpaw was hurtling downstream, the quickening current flipping her over and over so that she was unable to find a footing. She kicked out wildly, hoping to make it to the bank, but as her head went under again and icy water stung her eyes, Minnowpaw realized she had no clue of knowing where she or the riverbank were.

"Minnowpaw!" Tawnyclaw's muffled cry hit Minnowpaw's ears through the waves. Her shoulder cried out as it was wrenched, and she struggled to break the surface. She was growing tired, and it seemed that the daylight above the water was growing dimmer.

No, she thought. *I've got to get out of here!*

She kept kicking, unsheathing her claws and flailing madly in a desperate attempt to grab ahold of *something,* but everywhere she reached she found only water. The current was speeding up, and with a gasp of horror Minnowpaw realized she must be close to the gorge. She couldn't be swept over!

Minnowpaw fought and fought, each kick growing feebler as she weakened under the weight of the river. Her head felt light and dizzy with the lack of air, and soon the rushing of the waves became a dull roar. She was slipping out of consciousness. All the time, Tawnyclaw was running along the bank, but the gap between him and his apprentice was growing wider. Minnowpaw caught a blurry glimpse of him through the water and tried to call his name, but no sound escaped her. She suddenly felt weightless, and a strange sensation of falling overcame her as the world blinked shut.

Chapter 13

Everything was dark. There was no light, no sound, no tastes or smells. There was only a great emptiness, and overwhelming throes of pain. They gripped Minnowpaw's body tight, like an entire Clan of enemy warriors bearing down on her, but she could not fight them. She couldn't move, or call for help, or reach out her claws to attack. She was helpless, defenseless against the pain that wracked her body.

Suddenly the pain eased, and Minnowpaw's eyes half-opened to see a very faint light shining high above her. *Is this StarClan?* She wondered. *Am I dead?* But if this was StarClan, were there no warrior ancestors to greet her? Minnowpaw knew she'd gone over the gorge; she'd felt it. The sickening realization that no cat could survive such a fall hit her hard. But now she felt alone, trapped in the darkness. She was immobile, with only dull pain to remind her that she even existed.

Minnowpaw gazed at the light overhead. It was dim, and so far away, like the moon. Gasping, Minnowpaw realized it *was* the moon! Was she outside? Could she see the moon if she was in StarClan? Summoning all her strength, Minnowpaw sat up, the movement sending waves upon waves of pain through her body, and her breath was taken from her.

As she fought for breath, her senses returned. First her sight; she was in the RiverClan camp! It was night, and she was surrounded by her Clanmates, looks of terror, shock, grief, and confusion lighting each of their faces. Her hearing came next, slowly, and she heard gasps and muffled whispers and mutters. She couldn't make anything out completely. Then her smell came to her, bringing with it the scents of night, of water, and the unmistakable reek of death.

"Minnowpaw!" came a frightened yowl. A face appeared in front of her; it was Silverheart. "Minnowpaw," the medicine cat apprentice repeated, the word hardly more than a breath. "No, no... that isn't right, you're..."

Minnowpaw couldn't think clearly; her thoughts were all an incoherent jumble, and her skull felt like it was splitting in two. And she couldn't get that stench out of her nose!

"Minnowpaw," another cat spoke her name, his voice clouded with grief. Minnowpaw managed to turn her head and came face-to-face with Tawnyclaw. His eyes held countless emotions Minnowpaw had never seen from him, which confused her. What was happening?

As the voices around her became clearer, Minnowpaw was able to make out distinct voices. "What happened?" Maplenose was muttering.

"How is that possible?" Pebblenose meowed.

"It isn't," Birchclaw breathed in response.

Minnowpaw shook her head feebly, trying to clear it, but the motion just made her hurt worse. Her entire body was throbbing. Her scruff was sore, as if she'd been dragged for countless pawsteps. "What's going on?" she mumbled to Tawnyclaw, her words slurred. She hung her head and wretched onto the ground, throwing up mouthfuls of water. What in StarClan's name had happened to her?

She was able to meet Tawnyclaw's gaze again. "Minnowpaw," her mentor choked out. "What..." his mew was cut off by a small sob. "You were *dead*," he finished, his words barely audible.

Dead? The word hit Minnowpaw like a falling tree. She wasn't dead! How could she be, if she were in camp with her Clanmates now? And yet the putrid smell of death still surrounded her. "How--" she tried to speak, but suddenly the world began to spin and blackness overcame her.

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Minnowpaw's eyes opened slowly. Her pain was gone, replaced by warmth and grogginess. Her eyelids were as heavy as stones but she managed to lift them a fraction. Her nose was met by the warm, pleasant smell of herbs and berries. How had she gotten to the medicine den? She was vaguely aware of another cat near her, and

she caught a glimpse of a speckled silver pelt. She lifted her head. "Silverheart?" she croaked, her throat dry.

Immediately Silverheart was up. "Minnowpaw!" she meowed. "You're awake! Oh, thank StarClan!" She appeared in front of Minnowpaw. "Are you okay? How do you feel?"

Minnowpaw's mouth and throat felt like sand. "I'm thirsty," she rasped.

"Okay, let me get you some moss!" In an instant, Silverheart returned with a ball of moss dripping with water. Minnowpaw lapped at it gratefully, rejoicing as the cool wetness rehydrated her body. She licked it dry and collapsed back on the ground again. Her body felt too heavy to move.

Silverheart was watching her with wild, concerned eyes, staying a tail-length away. She looked afraid. "What happened?" she managed to say.

Silverheart's expression changed to one of confusion. Her ears twitched. "You don't know?" she said softly.

Minnowpaw shook her head. "Know what?"

"Minnowpaw," Silverheart breathed, "you died."

You were dead... Tawnyclaw's words came back to Minnowpaw.

"Died?" she echoed. "How? When?"

Silverheart sat, tail curling around her paws. "In the river," she mewed. "You fell in. Don't you remember?"

Blurred images came to Minnowpaw's mind; Silverheart and Tawnyclaw, the overflowing river, the wisps of feverfew clinging to the bank beneath the waves. "We were collecting herbs," Minnowpaw said. "I remember that. I went into the river to collect them for you. You said you needed them badly."

Silverheart was shaking her head. "I never should have let you get those herbs," she said, her voice low. "It was too dangerous. The

river was too strong."

Minnowpaw struggled to sit upright. "But what do you mean, 'I died?'" she said. "I'm not dead; I'm right here."

"But you weren't," Silverheart choked on a sob. "Minnowpaw, you went over the gorge. I *saw* you fall."

Minnowpaw didn't believe what she was hearing. "If I went over the gorge," she countered, "then how did I get back?" Was this some kind of cruel prank her Clan was playing on her? Or a weird dream?

"Tawnyclaw," Silverheart whispered. "I've never heard him sound like that."

"Sound like what?"

"When you went over, he screamed. He called your name to StarClan; he was so scared." Silverheart looked frightened. "He climbed down the gorge to get you, Minnowpaw. But it didn't matter, because you didn't survive the fall. You were *dead,* Minnowpaw," Silverheart sobbed again. "Tawnyclaw brought your body back to camp. He was so devastated. He laid your body out and I put herbs around you myself. We were just about to sit vigil for you when you..." she hesitated. "When you woke up," she finished.

Minnowpaw struggled for several long moments to process what Silverheart was telling her. It was so hard to remember anything. She wracked her brain harder, and suddenly everything came flooding back to her. She remembered being determined to get the last of the feverfew, slipping on a rock, tumbling down the river. She remembered the choking sensation of swallowing water, desperation as she fought for air, and she remembered fading. Suddenly her breaths were coming in gasps, and she felt her stomach clench. With no warning, she leaned over and vomited again.

"Here," Silverheart meowed, and pushed a piece of birch bark towards Minnowpaw. On top of it were some strange-looking leaves and a few tiny black seeds. "The herbs will ease your stomach and

your pain, and the poppy seeds will help you sleep."

Minnowpaw recognized one of the herbs; it was the feverfew she'd collected. "What's that for?" she asked.

"You have a fever," Silverheart stated. "Can't you tell? You're burning up!"

Minnowpaw couldn't tell. She knew she felt warm, but she was feeling so many other sensations that it was hard to distinguish one from the next. She just wanted to sleep. So she lapped up the herbs and let the poppy seeds carry her away into slumber.

Chapter 14

Watery morning light filtered into the medicine den as Minnowpaw awoke again. Had she slept all through yesterday and the night? At last her head was clear and she was fully aware of her surroundings. The aches in her body were mild, but her pelt felt hotter than fire. She *did* have a fever. But she felt better, less weak, and she could at last lift her body off of the ground.

Sitting up, she called, "Silverheart? Are you there?" Her throat was dry and her words were little more than a whisper.

A dark head poked into the medicine den. "She's out right now," Nightwhisper said, entering. "Good to see you're awake." The black tom padded up to Minnowpaw and touched his nose to Minnowpaw's head. "You still have a strong fever," he mewed, "but other than that, how are you feeling?"

"Thirsty," Minnowpaw rasped, "and hungry." She was finally aware of how hollow her stomach felt, and of its rumbling. How long had it been since she'd eaten, she wondered? How long had it been since she'd fallen into the river?

Since she'd died. Darkness seemed to engulf Minnowpaw as Silverheart's words came back to her. Had she really died? If so, how was she even here now? If she was dead, she would have been in StarClan, not back in RiverClan. None of it made any sense to her.

Minnowpaw wasn't aware that Nightwhisper had left until he returned then, bringing another water-soaked ball of moss. "Here's some water," he said softly. "I'll have one of the other apprentices bring you some fresh-kill in a bit. How does your body feel? Are you in pain?"

Minnowpaw slurped at the moss. When she was finished drinking, she said, "I don't hurt like I did before. My muscles are sore and I feel bruised all over, but it's bearable."

Nightwhisper nodded solemnly. "Well, you *are* bruised all over. Your body was really beat up from the rocks in the gorge. You were a mess when Tawnyclaw brought you back." He didn't meet Minnowpaw's gaze, and his eyes were instead focused on something distant. "You really don't remember anything?" he whispered.

"No," Minnowpaw replied. She desperately wanted to remember something, anything, that could help her piece together what had happened to her. But all she could remember was falling in the river, and Tawnyclaw's and Silverheart's haunted expressions as they told her that she'd died. "I couldn't have died, could I?" she voiced her thoughts to the medicine cat, hoping to find comfort in his answer. "Cats don't just come back from the dead. I'm not like a Clan leader with nine lives. If I had died, I'd be in StarClan right now."

"Did you see StarClan?" Nightwhisper asked her, suddenly looking eager.

Minnowpaw shook her head. "No. If I did, I don't remember it. I don't really remember much after I fell in the river. Please tell me: did I actually die?" Her voice had risen to a shout.

Slowly, Nightwhisper nodded. "Yes," he said firmly. "You were dead, Minnowpaw. I know death when I see it, and when I smell it. Tawnyclaw dragged your body out of the gorge and brought you home. I wish I could explain it to you, but I don't understand any of it myself."

The more Minnowpaw thought, the more she came to understand that no cat was lying to her. She had smelled death, too, and now she realized it had been on her. Without a doubt, she had been dead. But now she wasn't. How could anyone explain that?

As if he knew what she was thinking, Nightwhisper said, "I've had no signs or dreams from StarClan. I haven't spoken to our ancestors at all, and neither has Silverheart. I'm afraid they've left us in the dark for now."

Minnowpaw clawed at the ground. Her emotions jumbled together; anger, confusion, fear. "Can't you go to the Moonstone or

something?" she asked through gritted teeth. She knew Clan leaders and medicine cats often made the journey to Highstones at the far end of the Clan territories to speak to their warrior ancestors.

Nightwhisper sighed. "Ashstar won't allow me to," he said simply.

"What?" Minnowpaw hissed, rising from the ground. Her hind legs buckled under her and she fell back down.

Nightwhisper jumped up to catch her. "Be careful," he growled. "You need to take it easy. Your body has been through so much trauma and stress; StarClan knows how long it will take you to recover."

"StarClan should know what happened to me," Minnowpaw said bitterly, laying back down. "Why won't Ashstar let you travel to Highstones?" she demanded.

Nightwhisper shrugged, looking defeated. "He's scared, Minnowpaw. We all are."

"Scared?" Minnowpaw echoed. "Of me?"

"Not so much of you," Nightwhisper sighed. "I don't know what to say. We all saw you, dead. We laid you out for the vigil, and we were grieving. Then suddenly you woke up, gasping and vomiting water like you'd just been pulled out of the river. It wasn't even *sunhigh*," he hissed, "when Tawnyclaw brought you back. You were dead until moonhigh! I can't blame the Clan for being afraid, and I won't lie and say that I don't share some of their fear. Nothing like this has ever happened in the history of the Clans."

Minnowpaw bristled. "So are you scared of me?" she asked flatly. Nightwhisper did not answer, and that alone broke Minnowpaw's heart. She turned away from him and lay facing the wall of his den.

"I'll bring you some more herbs," Nightwhisper said quietly, "and you can sleep again. There'll be fresh-kill for you when you wake." A few moments later, he placed another pile of herbs in front of her. There was feverfew and more poppy seeds, along with various other leaves that Minnowpaw didn't even feel like asking about. She

just lapped them up, ignoring the bitter taste, and waited for the comforting numbness of sleep.

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Many days passed, and Minnowpaw spent most of them sleeping. She never saw another cat except for Nightwhisper and Silverheart, who checked her over and gave her herbs, cleaned her nest, gave her fresh-kill, and cleared away her dirt. After a while, Minnowpaw began to feel like a prisoner in her own camp. She didn't know how long she'd been confined to the medicine den, or why she hadn't seen any other cat. It was like there was no RiverClan anymore, or if there was, she was no longer a part of it. She finally lost her fever, and her aches faded away, leaving only the pestering pain in her shoulder. It felt like ages ago that she'd fought with Copperfoot by Sunningrocks.

After what felt like an eternity, Nightwhisper told Minnowpaw that she could leave the medicine den. "The sunlight will do you good," he told her. "And it will give me time to thoroughly clean the den. It reeks of your sickness."

"Come on," Silverheart mewed encouragingly, pressing her silver pelt to Minnowpaw's. "You can lean on my shoulder."

Minnowpaw wanted to protest, but she realized she couldn't hold herself up on her own paws. She'd lost a lot of weight; half of the fresh-kill she ate came right back up. And her body was weak from the fall, as well as from being stationary in the medicine den. Minnowpaw had to face the grim reality that she was weak.

So, leaning against Silverheart for support, Minnowpaw limped out of the den and into camp. She was met with bright, harsh sunlight that made her squint, and a wave of heat coming down from the sun above. Everything was so green, she noticed. The plants and trees looked so lush and alive, and Minnowpaw stopped in her tracks. "It's *greenleaf*?" she exclaimed.

Silverheart nodded solemnly. "A lot of time has passed." She continued to lead Minnowpaw out, and they stopped about three fox-lengths from the medicine den and Minnowpaw collapsed again.

Her flanks heaved. Moving such a short distance had left her winded. "What's wrong with me?" she muttered. "How can I be so weak?"

Silverheart laid next to Minnowpaw and licked her cheek affectionately. "You just need to build your strength back up," she encouraged.

Minnowpaw suddenly became aware of eyes on her. Looking around, she saw that every cat in the camp was watching her, whether obviously or subtly. Cherryheart was dozing outside of the nursery, but Beechkit, Reedkit, Specklekit, and Breezekit were looking at Minnowpaw with wide, curious, frightened eyes. As she caught their gazes, they buried themselves farther into their mother's pelt. From the elders' den came Troutleap's thoughtful gaze and Blacktail's harsh, distrusting one. Birchclaw and Mudpelt lay outside the warriors' den, their faces unreadable, and Shadebelly's eyes were pinned on her from outside Ashstar's den.

Minnowpaw growled. "Does no one have anything better to do than watch me?" she said to Silverheart.

The medicine cat apprentice ran her tail along Minnowpaw's spine, pressing closer to her. "Don't worry about them," she said. "None of them really know how to take any of this."

"And I'm supposed to?" Minnowpaw retorted.

The ferns at the entrance to the camp rustled, announcing the return of a patrol. "Minnowpaw!" a shocked voice called, and Minnowpaw looked up to see Tawnyclaw racing over, a massive water vole in his jaws. He threw it aside as he reached her, and Silverheart scrambled up to give him room. Tawnyclaw nuzzled Minnowpaw's muzzle with his own, sighing in relief. "I'm so glad to see you," he murmured.

Minnowpaw's chest felt tight. When was the last time she'd seen her mentor? "It's good to see you, too," she said back, breathing in his scent.

"How are you?" Tawnyclaw stepped back to look Minnowpaw in

the eyes. Minnowpaw had never seen the tom show so much emotion before, but now his gaze was clouded with so many feelings.

"I'm okay," Minnowpaw replied. She was vaguely aware of Silverheart walking away, leaving the two cats in peace. Tawnyclaw settled down next to Minnowpaw. After several moments of thinking, Minnowpaw whispered, "I'm sorry."

Tawnyclaw snapped his head to her. "For what?" he said, sounding exasperated.

Minnowpaw shrugged. "You told me to get out of the river. I didn't listen to you. And then you had to go after me. You could have gotten hurt."

Tawnyclaw's blue eyes widened in shock. "You have nothing to apologize for," he breathed. "It was all my fault."

Minnowpaw was taken aback. "How?"

"I shouldn't have let you go out there in the first place. I'm a senior warrior; I knew it was dangerous, and I let you go anyway. If anything, I should have gotten those herbs. Or we should have just come back to camp and waited for the water to drop."

Minnowpaw shook her head. "We needed those herbs, though," she reasoned, then tilted her head. "I think so, at least. Silverheart seemed pretty certain that we needed them." She looked around and saw Silverheart playing with Cherryheart's kits. She looked so happy and carefree that Minnowpaw could hardly believe she was the same cat who'd looked so distant and scared when Minnowpaw had woken up the first time.

Tawnyclaw meowed, "I know. But I shouldn't have been so mouse-brained to let you go get them. There's just some cats we don't want to let down, I guess." Looking back at him, Minnowpaw could see Tawnyclaw's gaze resting on Silverheart as well. His eyes held admiration, adoration, and so much emotion that Minnowpaw's breath was nearly knocked out of her. She'd never seen any cat look at another the way Tawnyclaw was looking at

Silverheart, and suddenly she realized something. Her mentor was in love with the beautiful medicine cat apprentice!

"Silverheart?" she mewed in disbelief.

Tawnyclaw nodded sadly.

"Does she know?"

"No." Tawnyclaw's mew was firm. "There's no point, after all. It would be unfair of me to tell her; her paws are guided by StarClan, and I would be a selfish fool to disturb the path our ancestors have laid out for her." His voice held longing and regret. There had been times before when Minnowpaw wondered why Tawnyclaw, as a handsome and respected warrior, had never taken a mate, but now she knew; he loved Silverheart, with a love so deep that he could never overcome it and move on.

Suddenly her heart ached for her mentor. What must it feel like to love so deeply and know that your love was fruitless? Minnowpaw wondered if she would ever feel the love that Tawnyclaw felt for Silverheart; was there a cat in RiverClan that she could ever love as much?

And then Flamepelt padded into the clearing. The handsome young ginger tom was leading a hunting patrol, followed by Redpaw, Cloudsplash, and Ashflower, whose belly was beginning to swell with kits. Minnowpaw knew that she cared deeply for Flamepelt, and she liked him a lot, but did she love him? Moreover, did she love him with a fierceness like Tawnyclaw's love, or the love between her mother and father? Minnowpaw realized that was a question she couldn't answer.

Chapter 15

An entire moon passed. Greenleaf grew hot and dry, and Minnowpaw became desperately bored and lonely in the medicine den. Silverheart kept her company usually, but it seemed that Nightwhisper had his apprentice running around so much for various tasks that she was hardly around. The dark-pelted medicine cat himself didn't stay around Minnowpaw too long, and when he did his words were few and his gaze was distant. Tawnyclaw came to visit her as well, but as a senior warrior he was very busy. She'd only gotten to see Flamepelt twice, and her heart longed to spend time with her friend. Even Sorrelstream hadn't visited her. And Minnowpaw had yet to leave camp, let alone return to her apprentice duties. It seemed like her life had fallen apart.

Late one night, long before the pale light of dawn cracked the darkness of the forest, Minnowpaw tossed and turned in her nest, sleeping fitfully. Thunder cracked overhead and lightning pierced the sky as rain pelted the ground heavily. The air was thick with the still, wet heat of greenleaf. Minnowpaw jerked and twitched in her sleep as an unsettling dream took hold of her.

She was submerged in darkness, everything around her a pale blur. The stars of Silverpelt spiraled and swirled around her, leading to a point in the distance. Strange sounds came from the darkness, and she was frightened. Desperately, Minnowpaw felt her paws carrying her towards the end of the starry spiral. Sharp rocks and thorns scratched at her feet but she pressed on, the noise growing into the anguished yowls of countless cats. After a while, her paws skidded on stone and she came to a halt on the edge of a cliff, staring down into a small chasm below. The spiral of stars came down to rest on the silver body of a cat.

Muffled whispers sounded around Minnowpaw. What was this place? Why was she so frightened?

Can't stay here...

Not supposed to happen...

Send her back...

The whispers grew into a cacophony of indistinguishable voices, calling out and deafening her. Breathing hard, Minnowpaw turned and ran away, only to be met by the crushing darkness and piercing cries. She tried to call out for help, but her voice would not come. She was alone.

A booming crack of thunder lurched Minnowpaw out of sleep, and she bolted upright in her nest, gasping for air. "Silverheart!"

Soft rain drummed outside, and Minnowpaw gazed around her, comforted at the now-familiar walls of the medicine den. She was still in camp. But where had she been just now? It hadn't felt like a normal dream at all. And the fear she'd felt was very real, and still lingered.

Silverheart's head poked up from her own nest, her eyes nearly as frightened as Minnowpaw felt. "Minnowpaw?" she called softly. "Are you okay?" She stepped out, shaking her pelt.

Minnowpaw shook her head, trying to clear it. She couldn't stop hearing the rush of angry whispering, or the screams of terror. "I... I don't know," she said. "I had a strange dream."

"Me, too," Silverheart mewed softly.

Minnowpaw snapped her head up. "Did StarClan finally speak to you?" All this time, Minnowpaw had been so desperate for an explanation, but their warrior ancestors hadn't spoken at all. Had they finally broken their silence?

"I'm not sure," Silverheart said slowly. A dim shaft of light pierced the den; the sun was rising. "I... I was dreaming about that day by the river, but all I could see was the feverfew you were collecting. Why were we collecting feverfew?"

Minnowpaw cocked her head. Didn't Silverheart remember? "Cherryheart's kits caught fevers," she explained slowly, "so you ran out. You seemed really sure that you couldn't go without it."

Silverheart's gaze darkened, which didn't comfort Minnowpaw at all. "I know that I felt absolutely certain we needed it. But it was so close to greenleaf; hardly any cat catches a fever in the warmer moons. The only cat who's caught a fever since then," her eyes flicked to Minnowpaw, "is you."

Minnowpaw remembered the burning in her pelt in the days following her accident. The fever had wracked her body and made her so weak. "Yeah, I had a fever," she meowed. "But I wouldn't have had one if I didn't fall in the river." Confusion swirled around her.

It was mirrored in Silverheart's expression. "I know, and that doesn't make any sense. I felt like StarClan was telling me to get feverfew, like it was the most important thing. But if we hadn't gone that day at all, we wouldn't have needed it so soon." Minnowpaw wasn't even sure the medicine cat apprentice was talking to her at this point, until she looked at Minnowpaw and said, "Can you tell me about your dream?"

Breathing deeply, Minnowpaw told Silverheart everything. She couldn't come close to finding the right words to describe the fear she'd felt, but it looked like Silverheart understood. When she was done speaking, Silverheart was silent for several long moments. Outside, Minnowpaw heard the rain ease slightly and the camp was beginning to awaken.

Silverheart shook her head, a mixture of uncertainty, fear, and determination in her gaze. "I can't do this any more," she muttered. Without a warning, she burst out of the den. The sound roused Nightwhisper, who rushed out after her, looking shocked and scared. Pulling herself up, Minnowpaw wobbled out of the den as well.

It was only drizzling, and Shadebelly was beginning to assign the patrols. Minnowpaw caught a glimpse of Birchclaw, Sweetstripe, Nettlestep and Cinderpaw gathered together. The other apprentices had grown so big! Minnowpaw was struck by the unsettling realization that they were almost as far along in their training as she was, and hers was still halted.

"Ashstar!" Silverheart yowled as she made her way to their leader's den. The burly gray tomcat came out into the clearing, his head tilted.

"What is it, Silverheart?" he mewed respectfully. The rest of the Clan, disturbed by the commotion, was emerging to see what was going on. Tawnyclaw instinctively joined Minnowpaw, offering his shoulder for her to lean onto. She accepted gratefully. The sooner she returned to training, the better.

"I can't do this any longer!" Silverheart said firmly, her tail lashing. "I've waited long enough, and it's gotten me nowhere. So with or without your permission, I'm going to Highstones!"

The Clan gasped, and similar expressions of shock clouded Ashstar's and Nightwhisper's faces.

"No," Nightwhisper's voice was firm, as he padded up behind his apprentice. "You won't be going to Highstones."

Silverheart turned on her mentor, her gaze burning. "Why not?" she demanded. "Have you had any sort of sign from them? Because I haven't, and I'm tired of waiting. I need answers!"

Nightwhisper kneaded the mud with his claws impatiently. "If our ancestors have not spoken to us, then they have nothing to say," he growled.

Silverheart hissed. Minnowpaw had never seen her so angry, or so passionate. "You sound as if you've given up on them!" she challenged.

Whispers sounded from the gathered cats. "Has Nightwhisper lost faith in StarClan?" Sorrelstream muttered.

"Surely not," Twigtail replied.

"But they haven't spoken to him!" Maplenose sounded frightened.

"Enough!" Nightwhisper snapped, turning to face his Clanmates. "My faith in StarClan is just as strong as it has ever been! Nothing would change that so easily!"

Silverheart got in his face. "Then why are you so reluctant to let me speak with them? They haven't come to me in dreams, so I must go to them!"

"Is it that important?" Ashstar finally cut in, looking thoughtful and tired.

Silverheart wheeled around to face him. "Of course it is!" she exclaimed. "None of us know what happened to Minnowpaw, and only StarClan can tell me, but they've been silent!"

Minnowpaw started to take a step forward. This wasn't about her! It couldn't be! But Tawnyclaw stopped her, placing his paw in her way. "Don't jump in now," he murmured. "Let's hear them out."

Ashstar sighed. "Very well, then," he said softly. "Silverheart, since you are so insistent on going, I am granting you permission to make the journey to Highstones."

"You can't!" Nightwhisper objected, and for a moment he looked scared. "Silverheart, as your mentor, I won't allow it!"

Ashstar stepped forward and spoke slowly, as if choosing his words carefully. "Nightwhisper, you know I respect you more than any cat in the Clan. But as your Clan leader, I'm afraid I have to intervene on your authority. Though she is your apprentice, Silverheart has been recognized as a full medicine cat by StarClan; as is, to deny her this right is to deny our warrior ancestors."

Slowly, murmurs of approval rippled across the Clan. Minnowpaw felt a stab of pride and gratefulness towards her Clan leader. Nightwhisper snorted, but said nothing.

"Thank you, Ashstar," Silverheart said solemnly, not turning to face her mentor.

Ashstar dipped his head. "Of course," he mewed. "When do you want to leave? I'll prepare a patrol to escort you."

"As soon as possible," Silverheart replied immediately.

"Okay," Ashstar said. "Then Tawnyclaw, you will escort Silverheart

to Highstones. Bristlepelt and Poppypaw, you will go as well."

Mudpelt stepped forward. "Such a large patrol?"

Ashflower nodded in agreement. "Yes, surely one cat is enough? No other cat would dare intercept a medicine cat on their way to Mothermouth, but they might decide to attack if there's a full patrol."

Ashstar looked grim. "If this patrol is attacked by WindClan on their way across the moor, they can answer to both me and StarClan," he mewed firmly. "I fully intend on making sure Silverheart is safe during her journey. She is seeking information that we all need."

Minnowpaw's heart lurched. They were going to so much trouble for her, and yet her entire Clan seemed divided on it.

Hissing angrily, Nightwhisper turned and stomped back towards the medicine den. He stopped briefly as he passed Minnowpaw and Tawnyclaw, and spat, "You can leave the medicine den. You're fine now." The angry glare in his eyes cut Minnowpaw like a thorn, and she snapped her head to Tawnyclaw. His expression was dark and unreadable.

Before long, Silverheart had prepared bundles of traveling herbs for the Highstones patrol, and they began to leave. Quickly, Silverheart approached Minnowpaw, licked the top of her head, and whispered, "I promise I'll find the answers we're seeking." But as Minnowpaw watched her silver tail disappear from the camp, she had a feeling that things weren't going to get better from here.

Chapter 16

The camp was silent for several long moments. The rain eased further, and the sun shone weakly through the clouds over the horizon. Clearing his throat, Shadebelly said for the Clan to hear, "Alright, let's get the patrols going. Sweetstripe, Mudpelt, Nettlestep, and Cinderpaw will be the dawn patrol. Twigtail, take Cloudsplash and Birchclaw for a hunting patrol." As the Clan broke up, Minnowpaw felt a little upset that she hadn't been placed on a patrol. If Nightwhisper had released her from the medicine den, surely she was ready to get back to Clan life?

Then she saw Shadebelly approaching her. He looked unsure but sympathetic as he said, "When Tawnyclaw gets back, you can resume your training."

Minnowpaw nodded. "But can't I leave camp now?" she asked.

Pawsteps sounded and Minnowpaw saw Flamepelt approaching, Redpaw at his heels. "You can come watch our training session," he invited warmly. He added to Shadebelly, "As long as it's okay."

Shadebelly's whiskers twitched. "That's fine with me," he said. "If you're feeling up to it, maybe joining in would be good for you."

"Thanks, Shadebelly!" Minnowpaw dipped her head respectfully to the deputy, overjoyed. She'd finally get to leave camp! She felt like racing all the way to Fourtrees; although she wasn't as strong as she used to be, she felt like most of her energy had returned. She just needed to use it.

She bounded along next to Redpaw as Flamepelt led the way to the training clearing. Surprisingly, she was able to keep up, and was just barely out of breath when they arrived. Birds sang through the trees and Minnowpaw felt so alive. She sat on the edge of the clearing and wrapped her tail neatly around her paws as Flamepelt started the lesson.

"Okay, I'm going to show you how to get back up when an enemy warrior has you pinned down," he began to Redpaw. The young tom listened eagerly as Flamepelt explained the move. Minnowpaw felt a surge of pride as she listened to her friend; he was such a good mentor! She was so happy for him. "Now try it," he instructed Redpaw.

Flamepelt began by pinning Redpaw to the ground, his teeth on the red cat's throat and his paws on Redpaw's shoulders. Minnowpaw watched closely as Redpaw executed the move; he thrust his back paws up, colliding with Flamepelt's underbelly, dislodging the ginger warrior just enough for Redpaw to jump up. Not giving him any time to retaliate, Redpaw launched himself onto Flamepelt and dug his paws into his mentor's back, pinning him in return.

Flamepelt purred loudly. "Very well done!" he praised. Minnowpaw had to admit she was impressed. "Now get off me, you lump!"

Redpaw stepped back, looking proud. "Was that good?"

"It was excellent!" Flamepelt explained. "What do you think, Minnowpaw?"

Minnowpaw purred. "It was perfect!" she agreed. Deep down, she felt a little jealous as her previous fears came to life: her denmates had caught up to her in their training, and had maybe even surpassed her. But she didn't voice her feelings. She knew it wouldn't be fair to Redpaw.

"Would you like to join in?" Flamepelt invited Minnowpaw. His eyes gleamed.

Minnowpaw nodded eagerly. Her paws itched to do something. "Yes, please!"

Flamepelt nodding, purring again. "Okay, Redpaw, try to take Minnowpaw down," he said. "Use everything you've learned so far."

Nodding, Redpaw faced Minnowpaw. Minnowpaw dug her claws into the ground, preparing for the younger apprentice's attack. When he launched, Minnowpaw dodged clumsily and was unable to

turn fast enough to block Redpaw's second leap. He bowled her over and pinned her down with his teeth on her scruff.

"That was good," Flamepelt said to his apprentice, but his voice lacked the pride it had earlier. As Redpaw let Minnowpaw up, Minnowpaw noticed that Flamepelt looked sympathetic. "Sorry," he mewed to her.

Embarrassed, Minnowpaw shook her pelt. She felt taken aback at being beaten so easily by a younger apprentice. "It's okay," she reassured her friend. "It's just been so long. I just need to get back into it, that's all."

But that didn't seem to make Flamepelt feel any better. "Maybe you shouldn't get straight back into battle practice. Let's start with a patrol."

"But Shadebelly already sent out a patrol," Redpaw pointed out.

Flamepelt shrugged. "It never hurts to have an extra patrol," he reasoned. "You can hunt while we're at it. I'm sure the elders would welcome some fresh-kill."

"You don't have to take him away from training for me," Minnowpaw said quickly. "I can go back to camp and leave you to it."

Shaking his head, Flamepelt meowed, "Don't worry about it. Honestly, I think Redpaw might be farther along than his denmates."

"Only because I have the best mentor!" Redpaw bragged.

Flamepelt dipped his head, embarrassed. The three cats set off into the forest, Redpaw several tail-lengths ahead. "I'm going to start hunting!" he called back.

"Don't go too far!" Flamepelt warned. Redpaw bounded off.

Minnowpaw purred. "He's just as enthusiastic as he was when he was a kit," she said.

Flamepelt pressed his pelt to Minnowpaw's as they walked. "He's full of energy, but I thought he'd be harder to teach," he admitted. "In reality, he listens very well and learns really quickly. I'm impressed with his progress."

"Well, he was right," Minnowpaw meowed.

Flamepelt turned his head to her, looking confused. "About what?"

Minnowpaw gave him a friendly nudge. "About having the best mentor."

———

After they had finished their impromptu patrol, the three cats returned to camp. Redpaw was still bursting with energy, so Flamepelt told him, "Okay, go take your catch to Blacktail and Troutleap. I'll take you out for more battle practice." As the young tom hurried to the elders' den, Flamepelt rolled his eyes. "I was hoping we could sit and eat together," he admitted to Minnowpaw.

Minnowpaw flicked her friend's ears with her tail. "Later," she promised. Then she added, "Sorry I ruined your training session."

Flamepelt eyed her. "I told you not to worry about it. I've only been working so much with him lately because he never wants to stop. At this rate, I'd almost say he's ready for his warrior name." A moment too late, Flamepelt realized what he'd said and looked guilty. "Sorry, I didn't mean to--"

"It's okay, really. I know what you mean," Minnowpaw reassured him. His words stung harshly, but she couldn't take it personally. She hadn't been training properly since her fight with Copperfoot over a moon ago. She realized then that Redpaw, Cinderpaw, and Poppypaw just might become warriors before her; the moment Tawnyclaw got back, she'd just have to work twice as hard.

Redpaw returned as quickly as he'd left and headed straight for the camp entrance. Flamepelt nuzzled Minnowpaw's muzzle affectionately and followed his apprentice. Minnowpaw watched them leave, a bundle of emotions welling up inside her.

"Well, that's something," a voice said. Minnowpaw turned to see Sorrelstream approaching, her eyes lit up with amusement. She sat down beside her friend, whiskers twitching. "You guys are making it so obvious."

Embarrassed, Minnowpaw turned her eyes to the ground. Her heart was pounding. "I don't know what you mean," she lied. "Flamepelt and I are just friends."

Sorrelstream rolled her eyes, then nudged Minnowpaw with her paw. "Come hunting with me," she invited. "I promised Reedkit I'd bring him a fish to try."

"Are they already old enough to eat fresh-kill?" Minnowpaw asked, astonished. When Sorrelstream nodded, Minnowpaw muttered, "I've been away for too long."

Sorrelstream scoffed. "You've been right here this whole time! It's not like the Clan has moved on without you."

"It feels like it has."

Sorrelstream's gaze softened. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "Everything that happened was just so strange. I think most cats found it easier to ignore you and be afraid than accept that a miracle had happened."

Minnowpaw cocked her head. "You think it was a miracle?"

"Of course I do!" Sorrelstream exclaimed. "Any cat here with any sense should, too. Let's face it, Minnowpaw; you should have died." Her honesty hit Minnowpaw like a stone. "But you didn't. For whatever reason, StarClan decided to save you. They must think you're special."

Minnowpaw's throat suddenly felt tight. She'd never thought about it like that before, not when every day she faced the shocked, scared, and wary gazes of her Clanmates. Of *course* it was a miracle that she'd survived, although she wasn't sure that it was because StarClan thought she was special. She was just an ordinary RiverClan apprentice. In any case, Sorrelstream's words made her

feel so much better. "Thank you," she said to her friend.

Sorrelstream licked Minnowpaw's ears. "Now come on, let's go hunting. We haven't hung out in *ages*!" Without waiting for Minnowpaw's reply, she sped off. Minnowpaw followed, feeling better than she had in moons.

Chapter 17

It was nearly sunset when Sorrelstream and Minnowpaw returned to camp. Minnowpaw was tired, but no more than she would have been before her accident. Her heart soared as she realized that she was completely better; she could get back to her life now.

Sorrelstream had led her straight to the river, not thinking before doing so, and the sight of it had stopped Minnowpaw in her tracks. All she could remember upon seeing it was the rush of the waves in her ears and the choking sensation of drowning. But the river had been peaceful, bubbling along lightly, and after a moment Minnowpaw had been okay again. She fished from the bank, not stepping in or diving, but managed to catch one fish. On the way back, she'd also caught a juicy water vole. She and Sorrelstream were happy and satisfied as they got back to share their catch with Reedkit, Beechkit, Specklekit, and Breezekit.

The four kits tumbled out of the nursery, already looking almost big enough to be apprentices. They approached Sorrelstream eagerly, but looked more cautious when they saw that Minnowpaw was there, too.

Sorrelstream didn't give them a chance to say anything. She exclaimed, "Look what we brought for you!" She dropped a fat fish at their paws, and the four young cats' eyes gleamed.

Minnowpaw had dropped her fish on the fresh-kill pile but kept the water vole. She sat with Sorrelstream and the kits and watched, amused, as they dug in. She took a bite out of her vole and basked in the rich flavor.

"What's that?" Breezekit asked her. His black and white pelt was ruffled from playing.

"A water vole," Minnowpaw replied, pushing the creature towards him with her paw. "Want to try it? It's my favorite."

Breezekit gingerly took a bite, eyes widening. "It's delicious!" he exclaimed, diving back in for more.

Purring with amusement, Minnowpaw shared the water vole with the young kit, glad that his wariness around her had gone away. In fact, all four kits seemed to relax as they ate and shared tongues with the two older cats. The sun eventually dipped below the tree line, and soon after that Breezekit had fallen asleep against Minnowpaw. His flank rose and fell evenly as he slept.

Cherryheart had joined them, and was now bathing Specklekit as she also dozed off. The moon was beginning to rise, nearly full again, and Minnowpaw found herself watching the entrance to the camp in anticipation.

"They likely won't be back until much later," Cherryheart said softly, taking Minnowpaw's attention away.

"I know," Minnowpaw sighed. "I just can't stand the waiting." It had been easier during the day, when she'd spent her time with Flamepelt and then Sorrelstream, but as the camp descended into sleep, all she could think about was the return of the Highstones patrol. "Honestly, I don't know if I'm waiting for Silverheart or Tawnyclaw more," she admitted.

Cherryheart's gaze was understanding. "You're ready to start training again," she observed. Minnowpaw nodded. "But aren't you curious to hear what Silverheart has to tell us?"

Minnowpaw shrugged. "A little, I guess. But does it really matter? I know that what happened was weird, but it's already passed. Whether or not StarClan has an explanation, it's over now, right?" More softly, she said, "I just want things to get back to normal."

Minnowpaw awoke just before dawn, realizing that she had fallen asleep in the clearing, along with Sorrelstream, Cherryheart, and the kits. Breezekit lay curled close to Minnowpaw, snoring lightly. Blinking and yawning, Minnowpaw purred at the sight of him.

Thankfully, no more strange dreams had disturbed Minnowpaw's sleep. She couldn't stop thinking about the eeriness of the dream

she'd had previously, and couldn't begin to understand what it meant. *Maybe it didn't mean anything,* she thought. *Maybe it was just a dream. After all, StarClan doesn't send dreams to ordinary cats; just leaders and medicine cats.* That thought reassured Minnowpaw a bit.

The reeds rustled as a cat stepped out of the warriors' den, and Minnowpaw looked up to see Tawnyclaw stretching in the middle of camp. The patrol had returned! Minnowpaw jumped up, disturbing Breezekit and also waking the other cats around her. She rushed for Tawnyclaw, calling to him. "You're back!"

Her excitement melted away at the look in Tawnyclaw's eyes. She knew he must still be tired from the journey, but his gaze held a weariness far greater than that of the oldest elder in the forest. "What's wrong?" she asked, concerned. "Did Silverheart speak to StarClan?"

Tawnyclaw nodded slowly, then sighed. "You should hear it from her," he said softly. Minnowpaw turned to head to the medicine den, but Silverheart was already leaving, heading straight for Ashstar, who had also emerged from his den. As the camp awoke, muffled gasps and mutters carried across the camp as everyone watched their medicine cat and leader. Silverheart and Ashstar exchanged a few brief words, and Silverheart's expression was pained. Nightwhisper looked on from outside the medicine den. His eyes were filled with anger, scorn, and a tinge of fear.

At last, Bristlepelt broke the silence, calling loudly, "Well? What did StarClan say? What happened to my daughter?"

"Yeah, tell us!" Cloudsplash added. His tail lashed impatiently.

Ashstar flicked his ears to silence his Clan, then dipped his head to Silverheart. Facing her Clanmates, Silverheart told them, "I have spoken with StarClan." She hesitated. "And they had nothing to tell me."

After a moment of shocked silence, outbursts rose from the gathered cats.

"What do you mean?" Nettlestep called.

"So they didn't speak to you?" came Ashflower's concerned voice.

Silverheart sighed as she waited for everyone to calm down. "I tried," she said. Looking straight at Minnowpaw, she went on. "I really did. I'm sorry. StarClan has told me they have no answers for me. Whether they could tell me what I wanted to know or not, they refused. I'm afraid we'll never find the answers we seek. Perhaps it's best to just move on."

Nightwhisper snorted in contempt. "I told you it was a waste of time," he said evenly.

Silverheart turned sharply to face him. "No, you didn't. You just tried to stop me from going. Because you don't care like I do! You don't care about what happened to Minnowpaw, about finding the answers, or about Minnowpaw herself!"

Nightwhisper fluffed out his fur, looking furious. "I care about every cat in this Clan!" he hissed. "My job is to heal, and Minnowpaw is healthy again. If StarClan wished to tell us anything, they would have done so before now! If you think any differently, you're a fool. Let it go!"

"I won't!" Silverheart spat back. No cat intervened as the two medicine cats, mentor and apprentice, argued in front of them. Minnowpaw was frozen in place with shock. "I'm never going to stop wondering why my Clanmate, my *friend,* died and then came back! If that's not the doing of StarClan, then I'm not a medicine cat!" Her voice had risen to a shout. "You may have given up on Minnowpaw, but I haven't! Give me one reason why I should!"

Without hesitating, Nightwhisper spat, "Because that cat is cursed!" He turned sharply and disappeared into the medicine den.

Cursed. The word rang sharply in Minnowpaw's ears as shouting sounded around her. Her Clan was arguing again, and all of it was because of her. She longed to disappear and get away from all of this.

"Enough!" Ashstar yowled. Every cat fell silent. "Silverheart," he spoke more gently to the shaken medicine cat, "thank you for

making the journey to Highstones. I'm sorry you didn't find the answers you're looking for, and I pray that StarClan decides to speak with you soon." Silverheart just looked at the ground as Ashstar addressed the rest of the Clan. "As for everyone else, this Clan must resume its normal duties. Shadebelly, organize the morning patrols. Tawnyclaw, get Minnowpaw back to training. I'd like to see her back on course to become a warrior." His gaze was surprisingly warm as it rested on Minnowpaw. "I'd also like her to be on the Gathering patrol tonight."

"Why?" Pebblenose asked.

Ashstar cocked his head. "Why not?" he responded. "She had to miss the last two Gatherings while she was recovering. She's nearly a warrior now, and she should be involved in the Clan just as much as ever. Despite her accident, Minnowpaw is still a member of RiverClan and shouldn't be treated as any less than that."

Mudpelt spoke up. "But what happened was so... unnatural," he said slowly, not meeting Minnowpaw's gaze.

Sorrelstream turned on her brother. "It was just an accident!" she hissed. "Nothing more than that! Would you deny her her place in RiverClan over an *accident*?" Mudpelt didn't respond.

"You heard Nightwhisper!" Blacktail croaked from outside the elders' den. "Minnowpaw has been cursed by StarClan!" His unfriendly gaze met Minnowpaw's and she backed away from it. Tawnyclaw rested his tail comfortingly on her shoulder.

"That's enough!" Ashstar repeated. "Blacktail, Nightwhisper was just speaking out of anger. I'm sure he's as frustrated as Silverheart about StarClan's silence." Minnowpaw didn't believe him. "No cat in this Clan has been cursed, and I won't hear any talk of the matter!" His tail lashed impatiently. "Now everyone, go about your duties and stop all this nonsense! If any cat would like to carry on with it, you can answer to me!"

Minnowpaw's mind was in countless places as Shadebelly began to assign patrols. She couldn't even listen to him; she was lost in her own thoughts. Nightwhisper said she was cursed, and it seemed as

if many other cats in RiverClan believed him. Her accident was long gone, and she was fine now, but it was as if a ghost of that day still hung ominously over her Clan. It soothed her slightly to know that she still had the support of many Clanmates; Tawnyclaw had never given up on her, and Ashstar made it clear that he wouldn't, either. Silverheart was going to so much trouble for her, and Sorrelstream had stood up to her own brother for Minnowpaw. Blacktail was sour, but Troutleap had always been kind. And even the kits had lost all their caution around her after the previous evening. And lastly, she had Flamepelt, whose warmth and kindness always melted her heart. All the same, Minnowpaw felt torn as she watched her Clanmates disperse, throwing uneasy glances her way. Her stomach felt as heavy as a stone as she realized that her Clan was being torn in two.

Chapter 18

The Clan marched silently to the Gathering. Minnowpaw stayed at the back, padding next to Redpaw and Flamepelt. Ahead of her was Birchclaw and Pebblenose; the fluffy white she-cat hadn't even looked at her since the Clan meeting that morning. They were preceded by Twigtail, Tawnyclaw, and then Mudpelt, who also had stayed away from her. Silverheart was going as well, but Nightwhisper had stayed in his den all day and not joined them. Ashstar and Shadebelly, as usual, took the lead. A warm wind swept over the treetops and the bright silver moonlight led their way to Fourtrees. After all the time she'd spent recovering, Minnowpaw felt no pain in her shoulder or weariness at all; but the weight of her Clanmates' tension dragged her heart down the entire way to the Gathering.

Ashstar stopped at the ridge before Fourtrees, peering down at the clearing below. Stopping a tail-length behind her Clan, Minnowpaw sighed. She didn't feel up to speaking with cats from the other Clans; she just wanted to go home and curl up in her den and wait for morning to come.

"Cheer up," Flamepelt encouraged her gently, stopping next to her. He grazed her muzzle with his own. "Don't worry about anyone else. This will all blow over." Minnowpaw met his gaze; it was calm and warm.

"I feel like I've been away from the forest for moons," Minnowpaw admitted. "Today was my first real day of training in so long, and I haven't hardly spoken to anyone since the accident. I don't even feel like a Clan cat anymore," she finished despairingly. Ahead, Ashstar signaled for RiverClan to head down the slope.

Flamepelt entwined his tail with Minnowpaw's. "You're still the same cat you've always been," he meowed. "Sure, bad things have happened, but I know you haven't changed, Minnowpaw. And if you don't feel like a Clan cat anymore, maybe the Gathering will help."

Nodding slowly, Minnowpaw followed Flamepelt and the two cats caught up with the rest of their Clan, already plunging into the midst of the already gathered ShadowClan warriors. Minnowpaw spotted Icepaw right off the bat, talking with her brother Snakepaw. Minnowpaw headed straight for them, her spirits rising as she beheld the two ShadowClan cats. Though she hadn't spoken too much with Icepaw, the feisty ShadowClan apprentice was always fun to be around. Wordlessly, Flamepelt and Redpaw followed.

Spotting their approach, Icepaw called, "Hey, Redpaw! Minnowpaw, you're here this time!" Her blue eyes glowed in the moonlight.

"Hi, Icepaw," Minnowpaw greeted.

"Actually, we're warriors now," Snakepaw cut in. "I'm Snakefang, and she's Icetail."

"Aw, come on! I wanted to introduce myself!" Icetail complained, batting her brother with her paw.

"Congratulations," Flamepelt purred, and Redpaw and Minnowpaw echoed it. The news was just another reminder that Minnowpaw had to catch up in her training; she was the same age as Icetail and Snakefang!

"So are you a warrior now?" Icetail asked.

Minnowpaw shook her head. "Uh, not yet," she mewed awkwardly. How much should she tell them? Beyond Clan loyalties, how much information about her stinted training would she be comfortable sharing? "My training got delayed a bit," was all she said.

Icetail's face fell, and Minnowpaw could tell she wanted to ask about it, but she didn't. "Oh. Well, it shouldn't be too long now," she said nicely. Minnowpaw was grateful that she didn't pry, and suddenly found herself wanting to spill everything to the frost-colored cat. Even though they belonged to different Clans, Minnowpaw could see a friend in Icetail.

"So how are things in ShadowClan?" Flamepelt asked politely.

Snakefang shrugged. "Pretty much normal," he responded

nonchalantly. "Tanglestar is sick, but the prey has been running well this greenleaf."

"Idiot!" hissed a voice, and another ShadowClan warrior, a massive black tom, padded up next to Snakefang, glaring at him. "Just go around telling every cat!"

Snakefang rolled his eyes, clearly unnerved by his Clanmate's hostility. "Oh, get over it, Thorntooth," he said to the tom. "Every cat can see that Tanglestar isn't here, even dumb RiverClan cats." Sideways, he cast an amused glance towards Minnowpaw and her friends, letting them know that his insult wasn't genuine.

Thorntooth said nothing, but snorted and walked away. ThunderClan was beginning to arrive, and Redpaw jumped up to greet two apprentices. One was a ginger she-cat with a white belly, and the other was a long-furred ginger tom. "Hey, Larkpaw and Foxpaw!" Redpaw called. The two apprentices meowed polite greetings and sat with the growing group. Minnowpaw's gaze wandered over the other cats, looking around warily for Copperfoot. She hadn't seen him since the Gathering three moons ago, but the very thought of him knotted her stomach. At last, she saw him talking to Wasptail, the WindClan deputy, but they were too far away for Minnowpaw to hear their conversation. She spotted Tawnyclaw a little farther away, eyeing Copperfoot sideways. Minnowpaw supposed her mentor would hold a grudge against the ThunderClan deputy forever, and she didn't blame him.

A paw prodded Minnowpaw, tearing her away from her thoughts. It was Flamepelt. "Were you listening?" he asked, looking a little concerned.

"Uh, no, sorry," Minnowpaw stuttered. "I was just thinking."

"It's okay," Larkpaw said in a sweet voice. "I asked if Ashflower has had her kits yet. They're your siblings, right?"

Minnowpaw nodded. "Yes, they are. And no, she hasn't kitted yet, but it can't be too far off now." Her mother had been dragging around a massive belly for a long time.

"Copperfoot will hate to hear it when RiverClan has more kits," Foxpaw mused. "He won't stop talking about you guys. He thinks you're going to be a big threat soon."

"Are you allowed to talk to other Clans about that?" Redpaw asked, eyes wide.

Larkpaw snorted. "It's not like we take him seriously or anything. Copperfoot's a mouse-brain."

Foxpaw nodded. "I don't know why Duskstar ever appointed him as deputy. He never even had an apprentice before Rainpaw! I think Duskstar only appointed Rainpaw to him when Sandstripe died so he could be deputy."

"Where is Rainpaw?" Redpaw asked. "I was hoping to talk to him."

Larkpaw looked away. "He couldn't come," she said shortly.

Minnowpaw briefly wondered if there was something Larkpaw wasn't saying, but that thought was overshadowed by the realization that Copperfoot's own Clanmates didn't like him too much. "So you don't approve of Copperfoot as deputy?" she braved.

Foxpaw hesitated. "Well, some cats do. He's got a few close friends who follow his every word and think he's a gift from StarClan. But most of us know he's an ordinary cat who's just lucky to be deputy, even though he shouldn't be."

"He's not dangerous or anything," Larkpaw added quickly. "He follows the warrior code as well as any cat."

Except for attacking helpless apprentices? Minnowpaw thought bitterly.

"He just likes to act like he's ThunderClan's leader. And he thinks fighting is the best way to solve problems," Larkpaw finished.

A loud yowl silenced their conversation as Featherstar called for the Gathering to begin. She sat on the Great Rock with Ashstar, and they were quickly joined by Duskstar and Berryfoot, ShadowClan's deputy. The pretty tortoiseshell stood confidently with her head

high. Featherstar nodded to her to speak first, and she stepped forward. "As you can see," she began, "Tanglestar is not here. Rest assured, he is fine. He caught a sickness and is still recovering. I am only taking his place for tonight."

Minnowpaw was impressed by Berryfoot's mannerisms. She definitely didn't fit the normal stereotype of cocky, violent, and hostile that was normally attributed to ShadowClan cats. "ShadowClan has seen a good moon," she meowed. "Lilyheart's three kits have begun their training. Darkpaw, Brindlepaw, and Mistpaw are now apprenticed to Squirrelwhisker, Brightleaf, and Adderfoot. And we have two new warriors: Icetail and Snakefang!" The Clans cheered, and Minnowpaw joined in.

Berryfoot stepped back and let Featherstar take her place. The wiry brown WindClan leader spoke. "There are two new dogs on the Twoleg farm near Highstones. We've had to chase them off, but they haven't been too aggressive. All the same, you should all keep an eye out for them, especially ShadowClan."

Berryfoot nodded respectfully. "We will, thank you."

Featherstar went on. "One of our elders, Roseheart, has passed on peacefully to StarClan. And we have welcomed a new warrior: Yellowbird!"

After the cheering died down, Featherstar stepped back to let Ashstar speak. Minnowpaw watched as her leader gazed down at the Clans. "There is little news to share from RiverClan," he said. "Prey has been plentiful, and we are still waiting for the arrival of Ashflower's kits. We thank StarClan for our prosperity." Minnowpaw was relieved that he didn't mention her or the accident. Then again, he was the most adamant of all the Clan to move on; she respected that.

Snorts and mutters sounded from one group of cats. Following the sound, Minnowpaw wasn't surprised to see Copperfoot at the center of it, sneering at the RiverClan cats around him. She half-expected him to say something, but he remained silent.

As quickly as he'd began, Ashstar was finished, and it was Duskstar's

turn to speak. "ThunderClan is well also. We have one new apprentice, Goldpaw, who has chosen the path of a medicine cat. She has been accepted by StarClan and apprenticed to Dawnpelt." Every cat cheered at that, even the most sour warriors. Silently, Minnowpaw wished the young cat well on her journey. Over the last few moons of watching Silverheart, she knew that Goldpaw wasn't on the easiest path; it certainly wasn't something Minnowpaw could do.

"We've had more trouble with kittypets recently," Duskstar went on, "but greenleaf always draws them out into the forest. Warm weather makes them think they're fit to catch mice, but we've scared them away everytime." ThunderClan cats chuckled. "Lastly, our eldest warrior, Ivystream, has retired to the elders' den after many, many moons serving her Clan. That is all the news we have."

Another peaceful Gathering, Minnowpaw thought. She found it odd that there weren't greater tensions between the Clans, but she was more glad of it than anything. However, there was always the tension between RiverClan and Copperfoot, but if he was as mouse-brained as Minnowpaw suspected (and as his own Clanmates said), she supposed she had nothing to worry about. However, as the Clans separated and began to leave, she spotted him once again talking to Wasptail. How much could the two possibly have to talk about?

"You coming?" came Flamepelt's voice. He was waiting for her, while the rest of the Clan was leaving the hollow. Minnowpaw bounded to his side and walked with him away from the Gathering.

Chapter 19

Three sunrises later, Ashstar gave RiverClan an announcement that both shocked and excited them. It came just a day after a patrol had a run-in with a ThunderClan hunting patrol dangerously close to the border. Ashstar stood tall and proud on the meeting rock and yowled, "It is time we take back Sunningrocks!"

He was met with silence at first as everyone took in the news, then an outburst of cheering. No one objected to the idea; Ashflower had just had her kits, two toms and a she-kit, and the Clan was strong and growing. Everyone was tired of the other Clans thinking RiverClan was weak, and Minnowpaw too was more than ready to prove them wrong. She'd been training tirelessly with Tawnyclaw, at last feeling like she was catching up to her denmates.

Once the cacophony of cheering had died down, Ashstar went on. "ThunderClan stole Sunningrocks back while I was still RiverClan's deputy, and since receiving my nine lives I have yet to put things right. I cannot hope to serve my Clan to the fullest if I can't even grant them their own territory to hunt on. ThunderClan has had control of Sunningrocks for far too long; it's time to take back what is rightfully ours!"

His speech further fueled the Clan, giving them new vigor and life that they hadn't felt in moons. Minnowpaw was a little surprised by Ashstar's words; she'd only ever seen the peaceful, diplomatic side of her leader. This was completely new, but it made her even more in awe of him.

"Who will be on the attack patrol?" Twigtail called over the Clan, his words silencing them.

"Normally, I would say that we shouldn't outright expect a battle," Ashstar began, "but StarClan knows ThunderClan won't give up so easily. So we'll take two patrols; I will lead the first to declare our right to the rocks, and a second will back us up."

"Will every cat be fighting, then?" Birchclaw asked.

Ashstar shook his head. "No. Although I doubt any cats from ThunderClan would circle around and attack the camp, I would still like a small patrol to stay and defend the elders and the nursery. My patrol will consist of myself, Twigtail, Nettlestep, Tawnyclaw, Cinderpaw, and Minnowpaw."

Minnowpaw nearly jumped for joy when Ashstar said her name. She'd be part of it, and on the first patrol at that! Ashstar went on, saying, "Shadebelly will lead the backup patrol. I want him to take Birchclaw, Mudpelt, Maplenose, Pebblenose, Bristlepelt, and Poppypaw. That means Sorrelstream, Sweetstripe, Cloudsplash, Flamepelt, and Redpaw will remain behind to defend the camp." Redpaw looked a little crestfallen, but Flamepelt nudged him gently and murmured something, and he perked back up a bit.

"When will we leave?" Tawnyclaw asked from beside Minnowpaw. He looked as if he'd jump into battle with ThunderClan now. Minnowpaw wondered if he was looking forward to sinking his claws into Copperfoot.

"We will set foot on the rocks at sunhigh tomorrow," Ashstar mewed firmly. It was nearly sunset now. "I expect all of you to eat and rest before then, and if you feel the need to prepare at all, do it. That's all." He jumped down from the rock and disappeared into his den, beckoning Shadebelly to follow him.

"Do you think you're ready?" Tawnyclaw asked Minnowpaw, but not in a concerned way.

A fire was spreading quickly throughout Minnowpaw's body as the anticipation of the next day overcame her. She was *more* than ready, she knew. "Yes," she said firmly to her mentor, and his whiskers twitched.

He meowed, "I'd like to get in a quick training session before the nightfall. Then make sure you eat some fresh-kill and get plenty of sleep, okay?"

Nodding, Minnowpaw followed Tawnyclaw out of camp for one

last battle practice.

The next day came quickly, and Minnowpaw woke early to find that everyone else was waking as well. The camp was bustling as an early hunting patrol brought a load of fresh-kill for the battle patrols, and Silverheart had Redpaw and Poppypaw dashing around, laying out piles of herbs for wounded cats. Cherryheart was scolding her kits as they ran around the camp excitedly, begging to go into battle.

"You aren't even apprentices yet!" Cherryheart told them, dragging them back towards the nursery. "Now stay out of everybody's way!"

Before Minnowpaw knew it, sunhigh was approaching, and the blistering heat of the sun didn't spare a hair on her pelt. It was going to be an uncomfortable battle, but a worthwhile one. As the two battle patrols began to organize, Minnowpaw took a moment to duck into the nursery. Ashflower was laying in her nest with her three kits suckling.

"Are you ready?" the silver queen murmured to Minnowpaw, careful not to wake the kits.

"Absolutely," Minnowpaw replied. Her claws itched with excitement, and she broke out into a purr as she looked at the three little bundles curled up to Ashflower's belly. She'd helped name them; Ripplekit was a striking silver tabby like his mother, and his pelt was flecked with white. The other tom, Sootkit, was patchy gray and black. And the little she-kit, tortoiseshell with an orange patch on her chest, Minnowpaw had named Amberkit. She was overflowing with love for these three kits, her little brothers and sister. And now, she was going to fight for them.

"This is for you," she murmured to them, nuzzling them gently with her nose. "I'm going to help you grow up in the strongest Clan in the forest."

Ashflower's gaze was full of love and pride. "Go now," she said gently. "Be brave and strong, and be careful."

Ducking out of the nursery, Minnowpaw whispered, "I will."

As she joined Ashstar's patrol at the camp entrance, Minnowpaw was approached by Flamepelt and Redpaw. "I wish I was going with you," Redpaw said a little grumpily. "But I guess I'm happy to protect the camp. There will always be more battles, right?"

Minnowpaw was surprised by how much the young tom had grown and matured over the moons. He was already as big as Minnowpaw, and he seemed almost wise at times. She purred at his words, then came face-to-face with Flamepelt.

"Be careful," he cautioned, his green eyes warm.

Minnowpaw pressed her nose to his. "Don't worry about me," she said. Just then, Ashstar called for the patrols to leave, and Minnowpaw walked out of camp with them.

The first patrol marched silently through the reeds, heading straight for the river. The sound of birds and the scent of prey were all around, but every cat was focused on the upcoming battle. Minnowpaw's pelt was prickling as the sound of bubbling water reached her ears, and she was vaguely aware of the second patrol several fox-lengths behind her. Ashstar had ordered them to stay hidden in the forest on RiverClan's side of the river, and only come out when they heard the battle begin. As the first patrol exited the cover of the trees, the second stopped and crouched low in the leafy undergrowth, waiting.

When everyone was gathered on the riverbank, Ashstar flicked his tail in a silent command and waded into the river. Everyone else followed, and Minnowpaw barely felt the chill of the water as she strode across. By now, all her fear surrounding the water was gone, and for a short while, her accident was just a distant memory that may as well have been a dream.

At last, Minnowpaw stepped onto the rocks on the other side of the river, the warm stone blissful underpaw. Ashstar sat, his tail curling neatly over his paws, and the rest of the patrol did the same. "Now we wait for a ThunderClan patrol," he mewed softly to them.

They waited for what felt like ages. The blazing sun bore down on Minnowpaw's pelt and dried all the water on it. Where was the patrol? Surely ThunderClan was vigilant of this area even though they'd had no threat from RiverClan in moons. Just when Minnowpaw thought nothing would ever happen, the bushes on the other side of the rocks rustled and four ThunderClan cats stepped out of the forest.

In the lead was Mosswhisker, one of ThunderClan's senior warriors. His apprentice Larkpaw was next to him, and he muttered a quick few words to her and she bounded away, running back through the forest. The other two cats Minnowpaw recognized from Gatherings; they were Graytail and Skystream. "Well, well, what have we here?" Mosswhisker sneered. "A RiverClan patrol is trespassing, with their leader at its head?" He flexed his claws on the rocks, fur beginning to bush out.

Ashstar stood, and the rest of the patrol followed. In a clear voice, Ashstar stated, "We have come to reclaim Sunningrocks. Back down now and no blood will have to be shed."

Skystream hissed. "Arrogant furballs!"

Mosswhisker flicked his tail to silence his Clanmate. To the RiverClan patrols, he meowed, "You are a bunch of fools if you think ThunderClan will just give up Sunningrocks. No, you will have to fight for them. But you would need the power of StarClan to take them from us."

He was stalling, Minnowpaw knew. He'd sent Larkpaw back to get reinforcements, and now ThunderClan stood three-to-six with RiverClan. But he didn't look afraid of the enemy warriors; no, he looked completely confident. If he really believed RiverClan was weak, he was a mouse-brain. They'd show him!

Ashstar lifted his head high. "RiverClan is not as weak as you may think," he said evenly. "We are more than ready to take back our rightful territory."

"Enough!" Mosswhisker spat, clearly growing annoyed. "Attack!" he yowled to his two Clanmates, and the three cats launched

themselves at the patrol.

Mosswhisker was immediately grappling with Ashstar, the two toms hissing and spitting as they rolled over the ground in a mad fury. Tawnyclaw had Skystream pinned down, but the wiry young she-cat was able to wriggle free and swipe at him with her claws. Twigtail and Nettlestep were both fighting Graytail, but the large tom was big enough to hold his own against them. Before Minnowpaw could think of where to go, she was bowled over by a large body, squashed against the rocks. Her attacker spat viciously as it bit into her ear, and she yowled.

Furiously, Minnowpaw threw her body up and dislodged the cat on top of her. Spinning around, she saw Mintfur, a pale gray ThunderClan warrior, facing her. Minnowpaw leaped at Mintfur, claws outstretched, and scratched at her chest. ThunderClan reinforcements had come so quickly! Yowling, Mintfur nipped at Minnowpaw's face and shoulders. Yowls and screeches sounded around them as the ThunderClan backup patrol engaged in battle with RiverClan. Ashstar called a command and Shadebelly's patrol rushed out of the reeds, flying across the river and joining in the fight.

Mintfur flipped herself up, attempting to latch herself onto Minnowpaw's back. Thinking quickly, Minnowpaw turned over and met Mintfur's belly with her claws. Surprise washed over the she-cat's face, replaced with pain as her belly was ripped open. Minnowpaw kicked out and sent Mintfur flying. The injured warrior retreated into the trees.

Not able to catch a breath, Minnowpaw was knocked over again by Amberclaw, a burly ThunderClan tom. He pinned her to her back, reaching for her throat with his teeth. Minnowpaw kicked at him and bit his shoulder hard, tasting his blood in her mouth as he howled and loosened his grip. Regaining her footing, Minnowpaw slashed mercilessly at him with her claws, tearing away tufts of his reddish-brown fur. His eyes gleamed with rage and he fought back hard, diving for her legs. Minnowpaw jumped up, sending Amberclaw tumbling face-first into the stones. She landed on his back and dug in her claws, biting the back of his neck at the same time. He stopped struggling, and Minnowpaw got off of him. He too

ran away.

The fighting was still going on around her. Poppypaw and Cinderpaw were fighting side-by-side against Dapplenose, and Mudpelt was spitting viciously as he fought Swiftsky. Minnowpaw couldn't see most of her Clanmates amidst the battle, and it was hard to tell who was winning. It seemed that RiverClan was stronger than ThunderClan thought, but her enemies were fighting like LionClan as well.

A loud screech split the air and Minnowpaw looked around to see Tawnyclaw, blood dripping from his pelt, being pinned to the ground by Copperfoot. For a moment, she saw red as she let out a battle cry and launched herself at the ThunderClan deputy. She collided sharply with him and he rolled off of her mentor. Minnowpaw swiped and slashed at his muzzle as he kicked and fought beneath her.

"You!" he spat, scratching her chest with sharp claws. Minnowpaw barely felt it. "Maybe I should finish you off this time!"

Hissing, Minnowpaw raked her claws across his face, catching his eye. Blood dripped heavily from the wound, and his eye was now shut and swelling. "Never!" she hissed in return. Copperfoot sprang up and met Minnowpaw face-to-face, and the two locked together in a tussle of teeth and claws.

As they grappled, Minnowpaw caught glimpses of her other Clanmates; Maplenose was nipping at Oakfoot, who was joined by Stormspots. Blackpaw and Foxpaw fought together against Bristlepelt. Out of the corner of her eye, Minnowpaw saw a flash of gray and white paws and felt a body crash against her, knocking her off balance. Scrambling back up, she met the unsure gaze of Rainpaw. He looked strangely scared, and it caught Minnowpaw off guard.

"Mouse-brain!" Copperfoot hissed, but not to her. He was talking to Rainpaw! Swiping at his apprentice, he hissed, "She's mine!" Terrified, Rainpaw raced away.

A new kind of rage bubbled up inside Minnowpaw. "You talk to

your own apprentice like that?" she spat, leaping at the arrogant ThunderClan warrior again. She bit at his ears as his claws collided with her shoulder. Pain ripped through her pelt as her fur and skin were torn, and she felt hot blood welling out of the wound. Yowling with rage, she kicked strongly at his underbelly, feeling a surge of pride at the feeling of her claws ripping through his fur. Blood dripped onto the stones.

Grunting in pain, Copperfoot growled, "I'll make you wish you'd never met me!" He thrust up strongly, his shoulders colliding with Minnowpaw's chest, and she flew through the air a surprising distance, only to land on the ground with a thud that knocked the wind out of her. She gasped for breath, glad that nothing felt broken. She was sore and covered with blood, yet looking around she still couldn't see the standings of the battle. It seemed that neither Clan would give up soon.

A small trickle of fear ran through her when she saw Copperfoot still standing; the ginger warrior hadn't found another opponent. Instead, his icy, blood-thirsty gaze was fixed on Minnowpaw from several fox-lengths away. *Come and fight me!* His eyes seemed to say. Hissing, Minnowpaw raced back towards him and leaped.

At the same time, Shadebelly ran across her path from the right, barreling towards Stormspots, who was looming over Maplenose with his teeth on her throat. Minnowpaw opened her mouth to call an alarm, but she wasn't quick enough. She slammed straight into Shadebelly and knocked the gray warrior to the ground. His eyes lit up with shock. Then his head hit the stones with a sickening thud, and he did not move again.

Chapter 20

Minnowpaw stared in horror at Shadebelly. A thin stream of blood spilled from his head onto the rocks, trickling downhill towards the river. Her deputy's clouded eyes gazed sightlessly at the clear blue sky. The world around Minnowpaw fell silent.

No, was all she could think. *No, he can't be dead!*

Around her, the fighting stopped. Cats from both Clans cast their eyes towards Minnowpaw as she gaped at Shadebelly's body, frozen in place. Most of them had seen what had just happened. Minnowpaw couldn't form a complete thought. She stared at Shadebelly's flank, ripped and torn and bleeding from battle, and willed it to rise. But it didn't. Her deputy was dead.

And she'd killed him.

"Minnowpaw!" Tawnyclaw's voice cut through the silence and she looked up. Her mentor was pushing through the crowd of cats, limping as he approached her. "What--" he took in the sight of Shadebelly. "What happened?"

"I-- he jumped out in front of me," Minnowpaw managed, choking on a sob. *Oh, no, StarClan, no!* "I killed him," she whispered, wincing at the realization.

No cat spoke a word, but they all heard her. Only Tawnyclaw said, "No, it was an accident." His words were meant to be soothing, but his voice was flat with shock and disbelief.

"But he's dead," Minnowpaw murmured, grief washing over her. "He's dead and it's my fault!" All the excitement Minnowpaw had felt over this battle had been drained away, and suddenly she wished she'd never come at all. But it was too late.

Minnowpaw was finally able to look up. Her Clanmates' eyes were wide and horrified as they looked straight at her. ThunderClan

looked shocked as well, and oddly solemn. The fighting cats had broken apart, and stood panting and bleeding around her. Every cat from both Clans was looking right at her, and she couldn't get away from them.

Ashstar padded forward slowly, his gaze fixed on his deputy's body. "Shadebelly," he whispered in disbelief.

Suddenly Mosswhisker stepped forward. His gray pelt was terribly torn; clumps of fur clung to him, sticky with blood, and blood dripped from his one white forepaw where he'd torn a claw. "This battle is over," he announced, but his expression was impossible to read. "No more blood will be spilled over these rocks today. Go home, and lay your deputy to rest with dignity." Turning away, he flicked his tail for his Clanmates to follow, and they did, even Copperfoot. Minnowpaw stared in silence as they disappeared into the forest.

Now it was just RiverClan, and both battle patrols were rooted to the spot. Ashstar was still staring down at his deputy with a grief-stricken gaze. "Come on," he announced to his Clanmates. "Let's take Shadebelly home."

Minnowpaw was barely aware of the trek back to camp. Her mind was as numb as her body; she couldn't feel any of her wounds, though there were so many, and she could hardly think. The only image in her mind was Shadebelly's amber eyes, wide and alarmed, and the blood running from his head. She'd killed him. He was dead.

Not paying attention, Minnowpaw stumbled over a small hole in the ground. Immediately Tawnyclaw was there, wordlessly offering his shoulder for her to lean onto, even though he was limping from his wounds. Minnowpaw couldn't even form the words to thank him.

The cats who'd stayed behind bombarded them as soon as they reached the camp entrance.

"You're back!"

"Did you win?"

"How was the battle?"

And then the entire camp fell silent as they beheld Ashstar and Birchclaw, Shadebelly's body carried between them. They laid their fallen deputy in the center of camp, and Minnowpaw watched Cherryheart pull her kits closer to her with a paw. But even the kits had no words.

"What happened?" Silverheart exclaimed, rushing towards Shadebelly's body. "A ThunderClan cat killed him?"

At first, none of the cats from the battle said anything. Then Ashstar, weighing his words carefully, said, "Shadebelly was not killed by an enemy warrior. His death was an accident, but still an honorable one." His mew was thick with so much grief. "Tonight we will honor him for the cat he was, and send him on his way to StarClan."

Silverheart's eyes held countless questions, but she spoke none of them as she began to prepare Shadebelly's body for the vigil.

But Sweetstripe did say something. "What do you mean, it was an accident?" she demanded. "If a ThunderClan cat didn't kill him, then how did he die?"

"It was an accident," Ashstar repeated.

Suddenly, Mudpelt snorted. "Fox-dung!" he swore. He turned against Minnowpaw, rage in his yellow eyes. "We all saw it; Minnowpaw killed him!"

A single unified gasp rose from their Clanmates, and Minnowpaw stared at the ground. Mudpelt was right; she'd killed the RiverClan deputy.

"Minnowpaw killed him? That can't be true!" Flamepelt shouted. The handsome ginger warrior stepped through the crowd. "If Ashstar said it was an accident, then no cat is to blame!"

"Except Minnowpaw!" Mudpelt spat. "I saw her with my own two

eyes! She killed him! We never should have taken that cursed cat into battle! If she hadn't been there, my father would still be alive!"

The words stung Minnowpaw more harshly than all of her wounds. She backed away from Mudpelt, fighting the urge to screech. What was she supposed to do?

"That's *enough!*" Ashstar spat, leaping through the crowd and landing in front of Mudpelt. His pelt was bristling, and for a moment it looked like he was going to attack the young brown warrior. Instead he said, "I understand your grief. But your father died an honorable death, and no cat, especially one of your Clanmates, is to blame! If you really want to honor Shadebelly, then sit vigil for him! Don't try to tear apart the Clan he loved so much!"

Mudpelt gazed back at Ashstar defiantly, but then turned away. No other cat spoke a word as they prepared for the vigil.

By the time the sun had set and the moon was rising, Shadebelly's pelt was cleaned of dirt and blood and neatly groomed. He lay in the center of camp, looking as peaceful as if he were only sleeping, with various strongly-scented herbs tucked around his body. Minnowpaw couldn't bear to look at him, but at the same time she couldn't keep her eyes away. Since returning to camp no cat had approached her, even Flamepelt. But she didn't blame them; she was a murderer.

She had hardly been aware of Silverheart nudging her to the medicine den, or dressing her many wounds. She'd made eye contact with Nightwhisper only once, and there was a darkness, deep and angry, in his eyes. But she couldn't say anything to him, or anyone else. Her mind was numb and her heart was hollow, and she wished deeply to wake up and find that this had all been a terrible nightmare. But she knew it wasn't.

The Clan sat around Shadebelly's body until moonhigh, softly sharing tongues and exchanging stories about their beloved deputy. Just as the moon was reaching the top of the evening sky, Ashstar climbed onto the meeting rock and addressed the Clan.

"Today, we lost a great cat," he began. "I had the honor of having

Shadebelly serve by my side, and the even greater honor of calling him my friend. RiverClan will mourn him deeply for many moons to come."

The Clan murmured solemnly. Ashstar continued, "It is time to name a new deputy." He looked up towards the sky, where Silverpelt glimmered brilliantly above. Minnowpaw looked upwards too, wondering which star was Shadebelly. Was he looking down at her, angry for killing him? "I say these words before the body of Shadebelly, so that his spirit may hear and approve my choice," Ashstar called. "Birchclaw will be the new deputy of RiverClan."

Every cat mewed their approval; Birchclaw was a senior warrior, and very capable and respected. Through her shock, Minnowpaw wondered briefly if Ashstar had considered Tawnyclaw for the position.

"Now let us sit and keep vigil for Shadebelly, and share tongues with him one last time," Ashstar finished.

Each cat took turns approaching Shadebelly's body to murmur their farewell, and Minnowpaw got in line. Mudpelt and Sorrelstream sat at their father's head; Sorrelstream's face held nothing but grief and longing, but Mudpelt's eyes shone with pure hatred as Minnowpaw walked up. He hissed at her, and she flinched.

"Mudpelt, please," Sorrelstream pleaded, to Minnowpaw's surprise. The brown warrior begrudgingly backed away and let Minnowpaw come closer.

She bent her head down and touched her nose to Shadebelly's head. "I'm so, so sorry," she breathed, her words nearly lost in a sob. "I hope you can forgive me in StarClan."

She walked away, feeling Mudpelt's eyes burning into her pelt. The cat who had once been her friend now hated her, and had no trouble hiding it. Minnowpaw just wanted to get away from everyone, and she doubted Mudpelt would let her sit close for the vigil. So she ducked into the apprentice's den, which was empty; every cat would stay in the clearing tonight to mourn. But

Minnowpaw curled into her cold nest and begged for sleep to take her pain away.

Chapter 21

Several days later, Minnowpaw woke from yet another fitful night of sleep. She could hardly close her eyes anymore without seeing Shadebelly's frightened eyes and lifeless body. What sleep she did get was plagued by nightmares. Daytime wasn't much better, either; the whole Clan had been tense since Shadebelly's death; Ashstar didn't leave his den as much, and when he did he always looked tired and sad. By now it was clear how Minnowpaw's Clanmates felt about her. Mudpelt, Pebblenose, and Nightwhisper were completely avoiding her, and whenever they saw her they stared at her distrustingly. Blacktail was even more sour than usual, and had actually requested that she let the other apprentices take care of him and Troutleap. Troutleap himself was still nothing but nice to her.

Even Minnowpaw's denmates were wary of her. Poppypaw and Cinderpaw had moved their nests as far away from Minnowpaw as possible, and only Redpaw didn't seem to mind sleeping near her. Minnowpaw hardly went on any patrols anymore, and when she did it was almost always with the same cats: Tawnyclaw, Flamepelt, Sorrelstream, Bristlepelt, or Redpaw. No one else wanted to be around her.

Minnowpaw stretched slowly and stepped out of the den. Redpaw, Cinderpaw, and Poppypaw were already gone, no doubt training. The three littermates were quickly approaching their warrior ceremonies, an honor Minnowpaw had yet to receive. She knew she'd gotten behind in her training, but she was fairly sure she'd caught up by now. She'd been an apprentice for well over six moons, but even now, a warrior ceremony wasn't very enticing to her. She didn't feel joy anymore.

Minnowpaw found herself being carried instinctively to the nursery. Ashflower always welcomed her there, and at least Cherryheart and her kits still wanted her around. Neither queen blamed Minnowpaw for Shadebelly's death, and they always had

soothing words to comfort her. And Minnowpaw had grown increasingly fond of Ripplekit, Sootkit, and Amberkit in the days since their birth. Her little siblings were growing strong, and already she was so proud of them.

Pushing through the ferns, Minnowpaw was met by the sweet scent of milk. Ashflower was nursing her kits, and Cherryheart and her litter were still asleep in their nest. Ashflower, lifting her head at the sound of Minnowpaw's arrival, said in a sweet voice, "Good morning, Minnowpaw. How did you sleep?" Her eyes were concerned.

Minnowpaw shrugged. "Not well," she sighed, flopping down in front of her mother. She rested her chin on her forepaws and watched the tiny kits suckling at Ashflower's belly. She wished she could stay in the nursery forever, she thought. "I don't think I'm going to be a warrior now." She suddenly found herself voicing her fears out loud.

Ashflower reached her head forward to lick Minnowpaw's cheek. "Don't say that," she murmured. "Of course you'll be a warrior. You're caught up in your training now, and once Ashstar is done grieving for Shadebelly, I'm sure he'll be ready to give you your warrior name."

Minnowpaw sighed. In Cherryheart's nest, the tortoiseshell queen and her four kits were waking. Parting her jaws in a massive yawn, Cherryheart said, "Minnowpaw, if any cat is deserving of a warrior name, it's you. You've been so patient in your recovery, and you've been through so much. But you've also been so strong, stronger than any warrior in this Clan."

Minnowpaw tried to let Cherryheart's words soothe her, but it was impossible. Hoisting herself back up, she murmured a goodbye and left the nursery. Outside, Birchclaw was assigning the morning patrols. He'd proven himself to be a worthy deputy, stepping up to take Shadebelly's place with ease. "Twigtail, take Pebblenose and Sorrelstream for the dawn patrol," he was saying to the gathered group of cats. "Cloudsplash, you can lead a hunting patrol." Birchclaw looked around, deciding who else to assign to the patrol. He briefly met Minnowpaw's eyes. "Take Mudpelt and Minnowpaw."

Minnowpaw's heart dropped. Mudpelt had been so hostile towards her since his father's death! Just then, the brown warrior said, "Why don't we take Nettlestep instead?" He shot a sharp look towards Minnowpaw.

Birchclaw sighed. "Okay, take Nettlestep," he conceded. Minnowpaw couldn't tell if she was more relieved or hurt.

"Minnowpaw can come hunting with us," a new voice piped up from the camp entrance. Flamepelt strode across camp, followed by Redpaw, who was carrying a massive wad of fresh ferns for nests. Stopping in front of the Clan, Flamepelt added, "If that's okay with you, Birchclaw."

Birchclaw nodded, looking relieved. "Yes, of course. And later I'd like to talk to you about Redpaw's progress."

Flamepelt approached Minnowpaw and rested his tail comfortingly on her shoulder. "Feeling up to hunting?" he asked.

Minnowpaw shrugged. "I guess." She didn't feel like moping around camp, but she also doubted that catching a couple of fish would make her feel any better.

"Let's go!" Redpaw had returned from dropping off the bedding. The long-legged red tom looked like he was bursting with energy. "I'll catch every fish in the river."

Flamepelt rolled his eyes. "Great, so we'll starve in leaf-bare."

Minnowpaw couldn't help the purr of amusement that escaped her. Flamepelt's eyes lit up, and he led the two apprentices out of camp. The forest was alive with chittering birds and the smells of lush green plants. The reeds around the camp swayed gently in the soft breeze, and prey-scent flooded Minnowpaw's nose. It actually felt great to be out of camp.

"It seems like you'll be made a warrior soon," Flamepelt said lightly, casting a sideways glance at Minnowpaw. Unlike the rest of their Clanmates, his gaze was calm as he beheld her, not clouded with suspicion. "Lots of cats are talking about it."

"In more ways than one," Redpaw muttered, and Flamepelt slapped his tail across his apprentice's mouth.

"Don't be rude," he scolded.

Minnowpaw sighed. "It's okay," she meowed. "It's not like I'm blind. I know what everyone is thinking, and they're right." She stopped walking. "I killed Shadebelly. I'm a murderer."

Flamepelt shook his head. "No, you're not," he said firmly. "Shadebelly's death was an accident. You didn't kill him, and any cat who thinks that is wrong."

"Yeah, accidents happen all the time," Redpaw added. "Sometimes they're worse, like that accident. It's horrible that we lost our deputy, but you're not to blame, Minnowpaw." Her denmate's eyes were warm and bright; though he was a young apprentice, Minnowpaw suspected he was wise beyond his moons.

"It doesn't really matter what happened, I guess," Minnowpaw sighed. "Plenty of cats have already made up their minds about me. Mudpelt hates me now; so do Pebblenose and Blacktail. Even Nightwhisper keeps away from me now. They all think I'm cursed." A sudden rush of anger flooded through her, and she swiped her paw furiously at a pebble in her path. It flew through the air and slammed into a beech tree.

"No." The boldness in Flamepelt's mew surprised Minnowpaw. Turning towards him, she saw a fierceness on his face that she'd only seen once before, after Copperfoot had attacked her at the river. It reminded her so much of her mother; only Ashflower had ever looked at her so protectively. "You are *not* cursed," he said. "Remember what I told you on the way to the last Gathering? I told you that you're still the same cat you've always been, no matter what you've been through. Remember?"

Minnowpaw nodded.

"It's still true. You haven't changed in any way that matters. You're still the same cat, and you shouldn't let anyone tell you you're not. *Be* that cat, Minnowpaw. Be brave and strong and smart

and funny."

Redpaw was gazing at his mentor in awe, nodding along with everything he said. "Yeah, Minnowpaw! Flamepelt's right! And sooner or later, our Clanmates will realize that, too!"

Suddenly, Minnowpaw felt her spirits lifting a little. Maybe her friends were right. But no matter what, being with them out here in the forest, away from everyone else, felt more right than anything.

Chapter 22

Minnowpaw spent a good part of the day hunting with Flamepelt and Redpaw, letting her emotions out as she caught prey for her Clan. Her heart was lighter as they trekked back to camp just after sunhigh, and for once Minnowpaw was relieved at the grumbling feeling in her stomach.

Once they got back to camp, the three cats put their fresh-kill on the pile, and Flamepelt said, "I'd love to share a fish with you, but I have to go talk to Birchclaw."

Redpaw suddenly looked nervous. "About me?"

"Yes. He just wants to know how your training is going," Flamepelt reassured his apprentice. "Don't worry; you're doing great."

As he padded away, Minnowpaw asked Redpaw, "Do you want to share some fresh-kill with me?"

Looking apologetic, Redpaw replied, "Sorry, I can't. I have to go find my littermates."

Minnowpaw felt a little crushed, but reminded herself that she wasn't the only cat in the Clan. It wasn't like Redpaw was saying he wasn't her friend. So she said, "Okay, some other time then." She instead picked up a juicy fish and headed for the nursery.

Cherryheart's kits were playing, rolling around the nursery floor chasing after a shiny pebble that some cat had brought them from the river. Ashflower and Cherryheart watched them, faces lit up in amusement, and Ashflower's own kits were slightly stirring in their nest.

Everyone looked up when Minnowpaw announced herself, and she was suddenly tackled by Specklekit, Birchkit, Reedkit, and Breezekit. They toppled her over and batted at her with their paws and, letting out a small cry of alarm, Minnowpaw dropped the fish

onto the ground.

"Got you!" Reedkit exclaimed.

"You tried to ambush us, but we were ready!" Breezekit added. "Because we're tough RiverClan warriors!"

Minnowpaw purred, pushing the kits off of her. "That's right, you are," she meowed. "If I *were* an enemy warrior, I'd be terrified!"

Squealing with laughter, the four kits ran back to their game. Minnowpaw picked the fish back up and set it in front of Ashflower, who blinked gratefully and took a bite. After a few moments of chewing, she said, "You're looking better."

Minnowpaw nodded and sat down. "I went out hunting with Flamepelt and Redpaw," she explained. "I guess I let myself forget that I still have friends in the Clan. I just felt like everybody hated me."

"I understand," Ashflower meowed, though Minnowpaw was certain she didn't. "You and Ashstar took Shadebelly's death harder than anyone else, and that kind of grief doesn't go away easily." More thoughtfully, she added, "You remind me more and more of Ashstar every day."

Minnowpaw blinked. "Really? How?"

Ashflower's whiskers twitched. "You have the same heart as him," she said. "You're fiercely protective over your Clanmates, and your loyalty to RiverClan runs deeper than the roots of the oldest tree in the forest. Cats like you are born leaders."

Minnowpaw almost jumped up. She'd never thought of herself as a leader before, except when she was a kit. But *every* kit wanted to be Clan leader someday. Since becoming an apprentice, Minnowpaw felt like she'd lost that urge. "Do you really think I could be Clan leader?" she mewed, surprised.

Ashflower shrugged. "Any cat can do it," she mused. "But only certain cats can do it well. I think, if you really wanted to, you could be a great leader for this Clan."

Minnowpaw thought for a moment. "I can't really see myself as a leader," she admitted.

Cherryheart's whiskers twitched mischievously. "Do you have other plans in mind?" she asked with a sideways look at the two litters of kits.

Minnowpaw's pelt grew hot. "I-I don't know if I'd be a good mother, either," she stammered. "I just meant that I think my place in RiverClan is just as a warrior."

Ashflower and Cherryheart exchanged an amused glance. Looking back at her daughter, Ashflower purred, "Of course, Minnowpaw. Whatever you decide to be, I know you'll do it well."

———

Later, Minnowpaw returned to camp yet again, after a long but refreshing evening patrol. She never thought she'd see the day where normal Clan duties felt so relieving. She'd gone with Tawnyclaw, Bristlepelt, and Poppypaw. The brown tabby apprentice had kept her distance from Minnowpaw, but otherwise wasn't unkind. It still stung, though.

Her father and mentor, however, acted like nothing was unusual. Even the borders were peaceful, a fact that Minnowpaw was grateful for. As the sun descended beneath the treetops, the patrol marched into the camp just as Nightwhisper and Silverheart were leaving.

"Where are you going?" Minnowpaw asked.

Nightwhisper ignored her, looking away. Silverheart said, "Highstones. It's the half-moon, so we're going to meet with the other medicine cats to share tongues with StarClan."

"Oh," was all Minnowpaw said. She knew all about the half-moon tradition, but she hadn't realized that it was tonight. She watched as the rest of her patrol walked away. She wanted to ask Silverheart something, but she held her tongue.

As if reading her expression, Silverheart's gaze softened and she

murmured, "Don't worry; I'm still trying. I won't give up on you as easily as others will." Minnowpaw swore she looked sideways at her sour mentor, but maybe she was just imagining it.

"Thank you," Minnowpaw breathed. She had mostly let go of her desire to know what had happened to her, but if Silverheart was still looking for answers, then she'd gladly hear them. "Travel safely." She stepped aside to let the two medicine cats through.

As Nightwhisper passed her, he snorted. "Don't kill any cats while we're gone," he muttered.

Minnowpaw stared crossly at his back as his tail disappeared into the forest. She bit back the urge to shout a retort; she was feeling more like herself again, but no matter Nightwhisper's feelings toward her, he was still her medicine cat. She had a duty to respect him, so she didn't respond to his ugly comment. She just turned and walked away.

———

Life continued in RiverClan, and though Silverheart once again received no answers from StarClan, Minnowpaw felt it easier to get through each day. She knew it would be hard to get over Shadebelly's death, but she hoped in time the pain and guilt would go away. Meanwhile, she trained harder than ever with Tawnyclaw, determined to finally earn her warrior name.

One very hot day, Minnowpaw found herself in another assessment. "Hopefully it will be your last," Tawnyclaw had told her good-naturedly. So now Minnowpaw was standing in the river, a small pile of fish on the bank behind her. She'd spent the morning battling with Tawnyclaw, and she thought she had done well. Now she had been instructed to hunt until the sun touched the treetops of ThunderClan territory. Looking across the river, Minnowpaw saw only a claw-scratch of space between the hot orange sun and the lush green oak leaves. Her gaze rested briefly on Sunningrocks, the territory they had failed to take back from ThunderClan.

A flash of movement caught her eye, and Minnowpaw snapped her head towards it and saw a flash of green eyes and a silver-streaked

pelt retreating back over Sunningrocks. The white paws caught her attention. Rainpaw? She wondered. Why was the ThunderClan apprentice so close to the border? Minnowpaw's heart skipped a beat as she wondered if he was spying; after all, his mentor was Copperfoot, and the ThunderClan deputy was notorious for monitoring the river border. But then why would Rainpaw be running back into the forest like he was scared?

Shaking her head, Minnowpaw decided to ignore it. If Rainpaw was on his own territory, then she would mind her own business. She'd already been attacked once for just looking over the border; she wasn't in a hurry for it to happen again.

By now, the sun had reached the trees and Minnowpaw stepped out of the river, shaking the cold water from her pelt. Picking up all of the fish in her jaws, Minnowpaw returned to camp. She found her Clanmates laying in the shade of the ferns, sharing tongues over fresh-kill. She was greeted by Sorrelstream and Nettlestep; the brown she-cat had loosened up around Minnowpaw, no longer sharing her Clanmates' superstitions about Minnowpaw.

"Nice job!" Sorrelstream congratulated Minnowpaw, eyeing the mess of fish she carried.

Minnowpaw's mouth was too full to speak, so she nodded her thanks and deposited her fresh-kill on the pile.

"Looks like we might have a new warrior by nightfall," Nettlestep mused, her eyes lit up. "So many cats are talking about it."

Minnowpaw purred. "I hope so. I've been waiting forever, but I feel like I'm ready." Suddenly, she remembered something. "Mouse dung!" she cursed. "I forgot to get my water vole on the way back!" She turned and headed for the camp entrance, crashing into Tawnyclaw.

Her mentor's eyes lit up with surprise as he halted, Minnowpaw's water vole in his jaws. Setting it down, he said, "Don't worry; I picked it up. It was a good catch."

The praise warmed Minnowpaw, and she flicked her tail across

Tawnyclaw's ears. "Did I do good?"

Tawnyclaw let out a small purr. "Of course," he replied. "Don't worry. I don't think you'll have to put up with me after today."

Whiskers twitching in amusement, Minnowpaw joked, "You'll miss me."

Tawnyclaw rolled his eyes. "Go get some fresh-kill," he instructed. "I'm going to talk to Ashstar about your naming ceremony." With that, he padded away towards Ashstar's den.

Minnowpaw picked up the water vole and headed for the nursery, hoping to share it. As she pushed through the reeds, she saw that Ashflower was dozing around Ripplekit, Sootkit, and Amberkit. Cherryheart was napping, too, but her four kits were awake and playing. Minnowpaw set the water vole down and greeted them.

"Hi, Minnowpaw!" Breezekit called, a little too loudly. Cherryheart stirred and shushed him. "Can I share that with you?" he asked more quietly, eyeing the fresh-kill.

Sitting down, Minnowpaw purred, "Yes. You all can." She beckoned over Reedkit, Specklekit, and Beechkit.

Beechkit scrunched up his nose. "I want a fish!" he exclaimed, and dashed out of the nursery. He returned a few moments later dragging a fish behind him, looking clumsy. He brought it between himself, Reedkit, and Specklekit, and the three young cats began to eat.

"I like water vole," Breezekit said, taking a huge bite. Ever since Minnowpaw had shared one with him the first time, the little black and white tom had chosen them over fish.

Feeling an itch on her neck, Minnowpaw scratched at it with her hind claws. She heard Breezekit choke a little as he struggled to eat his oversized mouthful. "You know, it would be easier if you took smaller bites," Minnowpaw joked. As she finished scratching, she looked back at Breezekit and saw the little tom writhing on the ground. His eyes were bulging and he kicked at the ground with all

four paws, and white foam bubbled at his mouth.

"Breezekit!" Minnowpaw shouted, jumping up. Her call woke up both sleeping queens, who saw the choking kit and began calling for help. "Breezekit, can you hear me?" Minnowpaw called desperately to him. She stood over him, feeling helpless as he rolled over on the ground. "Somebody, help!"

Silverheart rushed into the nursery, gasping as she saw Breezekit. "Move!" She ordered Minnowpaw. "Everyone, stand back!" Minnowpaw, Cherryheart, Ashflower, and the other kits all gave Silverheart room as the medicine cat apprentice approached Breezekit. By now his kicking had grown feebler, and the foam from his mouth was smeared all over the ground and his pelt. His little body was shaking with convulsions. Silverheart tried to pry open his mouth, then she began pressing on his flank with her paws. But then, to Minnowpaw's despair, Breezekit gave one final jerk and then lay still.

He was dead.

Chapter 23

"No! Breezekit!" Cherryheart wailed, jumping forward to her kit.

Silverheart stepped back. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "He's gone."

Minnowpaw couldn't move. Shadebelly's body flashed through her mind. *The water vole.*

"Why? StarClan, why?" Cherryheart cried. Outside the nursery, voices sounded as cats drew closer to the scene.

Silverheart stepped forward and gingerly picked up Breezekit's limp body from the ground. She carried it out of the nursery, followed closely by a panicked Cherryheart. Ashflower was at the grieving queen's side, trying to console her, and somehow Minnowpaw's feet carried her after them.

"What happened?" Birchclaw demanded, eyes wide as he beheld the dead kit.

"My kit is dead!" Cherryheart wailed as Silverheart laid Breezekit on the ground.

Cloudsplash pushed through the crowd. "My son!" he called, his voice anguished. He joined his mate over their son's body. "What happened?"

Silverheart looked at a loss for words. "I-I don't know," she stuttered. By now, every cat in the Clan was gathered around them. Ashstar and Tawnyclaw had emerged from Ashstar's den, looking on with shocked expressions. "I wasn't with him."

"He was eating some fresh-kill," came Reedkit's voice. No one had noticed the little she-kit approaching. Her eyes were fixed on her brother as she spoke, Specklekit and Beechkit behind her. "Then he started shaking and choking."

Quickly, Ashflower rushed back into the nursery, returning with the

water vole. It had one kit-sized bite taken out of it. She dropped it on the ground. "He was eating this."

Silverheart sniffed at it once, her face screwing up immediately in disgust. "It's poisoned!" she exclaimed. Minnowpaw's heart stopped.

Nightwhisper, coming forward, sniffed at it as well and nodded. "Yes, this vole is poisoned. Who brought this back to camp?"

Everyone was silent, and Minnowpaw said in a small voice, "Me."

Before she could think, Cloudsplash leaped at her and bowled her over, claws sinking into her shoulders as he spat in her face, "You killed my son!"

His body was pulled off of Minnowpaw by Tawnyclaw, who held the black and white warrior back. "Enough!" he hissed. "Minnowpaw is not to blame! She caught the vole, but I carried it back to camp! It was perfectly fine!"

Minnowpaw stood back up, shaking slightly. "It smelled fine," she insisted, but it was hard to find the words. "I was going to share it with him." She broke off in a sob, eyes stuck on the dead kit's body. First Shadebelly, now Breezekit, dead at her claws.

"It was fine!" Tawnyclaw insisted. He looked desperately towards Nightwhisper and Silverheart. "It has to be a sign from StarClan!" he exclaimed, eyes wide.

Silverheart was staring at the ground, her expression pained and grieving. But Nightwhisper's eyes turned dark and angry, and he turned his head towards Minnowpaw. "No, it isn't," he spat. "I tried to tell you all: Minnowpaw is cursed, and because of her, two cats are dead!"

His words were met with an uproar of agreement, and suddenly cats were pushing forward to spit and hiss in Minnowpaw's face: Mudpelt, Pebblenose, Cloudsplash, and Cherryheart. Twigtail and Sweetstripe's ears were flattened, and at the back of the crowd, Blacktail's tail lashed as he spat insults. Minnowpaw backed up, crouching low. Her Clan was turning against her.

"Enough!" Ashstar screeched. The noise died down. "Everyone, get back!"

Reluctantly, the angered cats retreated. Ashstar padded forward to look Minnowpaw in the eye. His gaze was pained, and Minnowpaw knew what he was thinking; she'd killed his deputy, and now a kit. "You didn't know it was poisoned?" he said softly.

"No," Minnowpaw sobbed. "Honestly, I didn't. Please believe me!"

Ashstar sighed. Without a word, he turned away from Minnowpaw and approached Breezekit's body. Touching the dead tom's flank with his nose, he murmured, "Farewell, Breezekit. May you find happy hunting in StarClan."

The sun was setting, and brilliant orange light illuminated the silent camp. Everyone was waiting for Ashstar to speak. After several unbearable moments, the gray tom jumped onto the meeting rock and said, "It is always a tragedy to lose a kit, and now we must say goodbye to Breezekit. Cherryheart, Cloudsplash, I am very sorry for the loss of your son. We'll never get to see him become a proud warrior of RiverClan. Tonight we will send him on to the comforting paws of our warrior ancestors."

The Clan began to sit vigil for Breezekit as the moon rose above the trees. Minnowpaw didn't approach; she'd made enemies of her Clanmates, and they looked at her with murder in their eyes. Feeling sick, she laid down outside the apprentice's den. Before she knew it, she was retching onto the ground, her flanks heaving as she coughed and spat. Her stomach burned.

A few moments later, Silverheart was at her side. "Here." She pushed a piece of birch bark towards Minnowpaw. It was slathered in honey, juniper berries, and poppy seeds.

"Why?" Minnowpaw rasped, her throat stinging with bile.

"The honey will soothe your throat, and the juniper will settle your stomach," Silverheart said softly. "And the poppy seeds will help you sleep."

Minnowpaw lapped at the bark, and the sweet honey washed over her throat. "Thank you," she whispered, not meeting Silverheart's gaze. "What am I going to do?"

Silverheart shook her head. "I don't know," she admitted.

———

Minnowpaw woke the next morning, still outside the apprentice's den. Blacktail and Troutleap were carrying Breezekit's little body out of camp as Cherryheart, Cloudsplash, and their remaining kits watched helplessly. Minnowpaw's heart twisted at the sight.

The entire camp had sat vigil for Breezekit, and now waited expectantly as they watched Ashstar rise from the ground. He looked exhausted, and for the first time Minnowpaw thought her leader looked a bit old. He looked around at his Clan and meowed solemnly, "I don't know what to do."

"It's obvious!" Mudpelt spat. "Banish Minnowpaw before she kills another cat!"

"I will not banish anyone," Ashstar said calmly.

"She's cursed!" Nightwhisper hissed, his words echoed by many others. "Two cats die in accidents, and who is at the center of it? She's too dangerous!"

Flamepelt picked through the crowd and came to stand at Minnowpaw's side. He wordlessly pressed his flank to hers, but it did not comfort her.

For a moment, Minnowpaw believed Ashstar was about to listen to his Clan and banish her. But instead he said, "No. Whatever has happened, I will not banish a member of my Clan." After a brief pause, he added, "However, there will be no naming ceremony." He turned and disappeared into his den.

Minnowpaw was at a loss for words. She was a murderer, and now she wasn't going to be a warrior. *Oh, StarClan,* she prayed silently. *Please help me*. But no answer came except for the whisper of the breeze through the reeds around the camp.

The day passed quickly, and Minnowpaw did nothing. Birchclaw assigned patrols, and she wasn't on any of them. She tried once to enter the nursery, but was met by Cherryheart's claws. So she lay outside the apprentice's den all day, watching the camp. Everyone stared at her, some in anger, some in fear, and a few in sympathy. With a sinking feeling, Minnowpaw knew that her life as she knew it was officially over.

When the sun had set, Minnowpaw stood, ignoring the rumbling in her belly, and stepped into the den. Poppypaw and Cinderpaw's eyes widened in fright, and they let out soft hisses to let Minnowpaw know she wasn't welcome. She turned away, Redpaw looking after her sympathetically. She fell asleep outside the apprentice's den.

Nightmares terrorized her. She felt her claws sinking into Shadebelly's throat, then tasted blood as Breezekit's body fell from her jaws. All the while, the anguished cries of her Clanmates rattled her brain, yowling in grief. They called for her to be banished, and killed. They called her a traitor, and a murderer, and cursed.

Then Minnowpaw found herself staring once again at the spiral of stars she'd seen in her previous dreams; they descended down and rested on a cat's body, and whispers reached her ears.

Can't stay here...

Not supposed to happen...

Send her back...

It was the same words she'd heard before, but now they were louder, pressing in on her from all directions. She fled through the trees, running blindly through the darkness. Thorns pierced her fur and she cried out for help.

The warmth of another body against her own woke Minnowpaw, and Flamepelt's scent met her nose. The ginger warrior had left the warriors' den and curled up comfortingly next to her. "It's okay," he whispered. "It was just a dream."

Minnowpaw pressed closer to him, finding comfort in his presence, and slipped back into sleep.

When she woke, Flamepelt was gone, and the camp was mostly empty. Looking at the sky, she saw that she had slept longer than usual. She stood and stretched, and instinctively looked around for Tawnyclaw or Sorrelstream; some cat she felt safe around. To her relief, she saw Tawnyclaw grooming his pelt outside the warriors' den and went over to him.

His gaze tightened at the sight of her. "I'm sorry," he murmured.

"What for?" Minnowpaw asked.

Tawnyclaw sighed. "I've failed you as a mentor. Ashstar isn't going to give you your warrior name now." He looked defeated.

His words hit Minnowpaw hard, and she dug her claws into the dirt. "I can't believe he really said that," she admitted. "He seemed so ready to move on after the accident, and I thought maybe he'd forgive me for Shadebelly's death. But I guess losing Breezekit was too much." She choked on her words.

Tawnyclaw looked to the sky, as if searching for an answer in the clouds. "Most cats believe what Nightwhisper has been saying. I never thought I'd see the day where a Clan turned against one of its own." He began padding away, tail drooping and head down. "For whatever it's worth, I'm sorry, Minnowpaw."

As Minnowpaw watched him leave, her heart shattered. Her mentor had surrendered. She suddenly remembered her early days of training, many moons ago, when she'd disobeyed Tawnyclaw and stormed off into the woods. After that, he'd told her he wasn't giving up on her. But now he had. Did she have anything left?

Minnowpaw paced around the camp. She couldn't do *anything*! Birchclaw wouldn't put her on a patrol, Tawnyclaw had no reason to continue training her, and she was no longer allowed in the nursery. Wherever she went in RiverClan, some cat would be waiting with teeth and claws to keep her away. Frustrated, she stomped towards the entrance.

"Hey!" a voice called behind her, and she recognized Nightwhisper. "Where are you going?" His tone was accusing.

"Out!" she replied without turning around. She didn't need to explain herself to any cat. Tail lashing, she shoved her way out of camp and into the forest. She nearly collided with Bristlepelt, who was on his way back with an excited-looking Poppypaw following.

Minnowpaw's father jumped out of the way in alarm, and Poppypaw flattened her ears against her head. "Watch it!" she hissed.

"Where are you going?" Bristlepelt asked, but Minnowpaw didn't answer. "Minnowpaw, come back!" he called after her. She just stomped on in a feeble attempt to get away from everything and everyone.

Chapter 24

Minnowpaw trudged along, feeling angrier with every pawstep. Why was all of this happening to her? She'd never been anything but loyal to RiverClan, but now every one of her Clanmates was convinced she was cursed! She couldn't believe that Shadebelly's and Breezekit's deaths had been anything more than an accident. But somehow she'd caused both of them! Silverheart had no answers from StarClan, and Nightwhisper had shunned her along with over half of RiverClan.

Minnowpaw skidded to a halt on the pebbles, nearly tumbling into the river. She'd been so focused on her thoughts she hadn't realized how far she'd gone already. She stared angrily at the bubbling water. "Why didn't you just kill me?" she screamed at it. But obviously, no answer came. Screeching with fury, Minnowpaw raked her claws at the water, sending droplets flying over herself and the riverbank. That only made her more mad, and she shook water from her whiskers. Her belly was growling irritably; she hadn't eaten since the previous morning, and it wasn't helping her mood.

"Everything would be better if I had just died," she muttered to herself, shocked that she believed her own words. If StarClan had just taken her, then Shadebelly and Breezekit would still be alive, and her Clan wouldn't hate her.

"Who are you talking to?" A voice came from across the river. Minnowpaw's head whipped towards the far bank, where she saw Rainpaw standing on the rocks at the edge of the river.

Minnowpaw growled softly. "Myself."

Rainpaw cocked his head. "You think you should be dead?" His tone was nothing more than friendly and curious. "Why?"

Minnowpaw suddenly remembered seeing him running away from the river two days earlier. "Why do you keep coming here?" she

asked, ignoring Rainpaw's question. "I saw you running away the other day; why? Is Copperfoot sending you to spy on RiverClan?" The last question came out more harshly than she'd intended.

Rainpaw's ears drooped. "No," he mewed. "I just like to get away sometimes. And when you saw me the other day, I thought you were going to attack me, so I ran."

Minnowpaw snorted. "I won't cross the border to attack you in your own territory. I'm not Copperfoot," she said bitterly, the memory of the attack resurfacing.

"I don't like him either," Rainpaw admitted, sitting down and curling his tail around his paws. The gray tom looked off into the distance. "He's mean and pushy. He never praises me, even when I do something right. He just wants to be Clan leader."

Though it wasn't news to Minnowpaw, she felt a pang of sympathy for the ThunderClan apprentice. But it didn't last; she couldn't bear to listen to another cat's problems when her own weighed on her so heavily. Plus, it wasn't like she could confide in Rainpaw, of all cats. They were from enemy Clans! "I shouldn't be talking to you," she said quickly, turning to leave. Over her shoulder, she added a soft "Goodbye," and disappeared into the reeds.

She walked slowly back to camp, and by the time she returned it was sunset. Her stomach was yowling with hunger and she wondered if she should catch some fresh-kill for herself; she shouldn't take any off the pile when she hadn't done anything for her Clan. But as she got closer to the camp entrance she heard Ashstar's voice speaking loudly, and she stopped in her tracks. She pricked her ears, picking up on her leader's words. "It is my honor to present these young cats to StarClan as warriors," he was saying.

Minnowpaw gasped. Redpaw, Poppypaw, and Cinderpaw were having their warrior ceremony! She bit back a yowl; she had known deep down they'd get their names before her, and now it was happening! And they'd started the ceremony without her!

Because no one wanted her there.

Minnowpaw crept forward and peered through the entrance to the camp. Sure enough, Ashstar was standing tall and proud on the meeting rock, Birchclaw at his side. Ashstar still looked rough, but his voice was clear as he spoke. In front of him stood the three apprentices, with Flamepelt, Bristlepelt, and Nettlestep behind them. The Clan watched on, looking proud. Minnowpaw saw Flamepelt briefly look around, his gaze concerned. Was he looking for her?

Ashstar raised his head. "I, Ashstar, leader of RiverClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these three apprentices. They have trained hard to learn the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as warriors in their turn." Jumping down, he faced Redpaw. "Redpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code, and to protect and defend this Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Redpaw said clearly, "I do."

"Then by the power of StarClan I give you your warrior name. Redpaw, from this moment you will be known as Redblaze. StarClan honors your wisdom and your heart, and we welcome you as a full warrior of RiverClan."

Minnowpaw watched and listened as Cinderpaw and Poppypaw both pledged themselves fully to their Clan. Ashstar said to Cinderpaw, "Cinderpaw, from this moment you will be known as Cinderfrost. StarClan honors your honesty and your hunting skill, and we welcome you as a full warrior of RiverClan."

Lastly, Ashstar turned to Poppypaw. "Poppypaw, from this moment you will be known as Poppywhisker. StarClan honors your bravery and your determination, and we welcome you as a full warrior of RiverClan."

"Redblaze! Cinderfrost! Poppywhisker!" The Clan cheered loudly for the three new warriors. Minnowpaw wanted to join them, but she could hardly think through the seething anger that filled her. Had her Clanmates really been so quick to cast her aside?

As the Clan broke up and the newly-named warrior prepared to sit

their silent vigil, Minnowpaw pushed her way into camp, heading straight for the apprentice's den. Redblaze watched her pass, looking apologetic, but his littermates' faces held nothing but contempt. Minnowpaw stopped outside of the den; she was the only apprentice again, but even the thought of having the den to herself didn't make Minnowpaw feel better. Did she even belong there? Deciding against it, Minnowpaw flopped onto the ground just outside the den, where she'd slept for the past two nights.

She laid there with her eyes closed, listening to the sounds of the camp. Nightwhisper and Silverheart were speaking about their herb stores. From the nursery came the squeaking voices of Ripplekit, Sootkit, and Amberkit; Minnowpaw longed to see them. Twigtail and Nettlestep exchanged a few words as they retired to the warriors' den. Louder than everything else was Minnowpaw's growling belly.

"Here," came Flamepelt's soft voice, and Minnowpaw opened her eyes to see the ginger warrior placing a fish in front of her. The smell was tantalizing, but although Minnowpaw was starving, she had little appetite. "I thought we could eat together," Flamepelt said, laying down beside her.

"I'm not hungry," she lied, but her belly growled again, giving her away. Flamepelt watched her expectantly, waiting for her to take the first bite. Finally, she did, and the rich fatty flavor was almost the best she'd ever tasted.

Satisfied, Flamepelt took a bite, watching the three warriors sitting vigil as he chewed. His gaze was thoughtful and uncertain, so Minnowpaw said at last, "It's okay if you tell me how proud you are of him."

Guilt washed over her friend's face. "I just didn't expect it to happen like this," he admitted. "You should have been sleeping in the warriors' den far before them."

Minnowpaw sighed. "Well, I'm not going to be a warrior now. Maybe it's for the best."

"How could you say that?" Flamepelt gasped. "You deserve to be a

warrior as much as any cat in the Clan!"

Minnowpaw choked on a sob. "No, I don't! I killed Shadebelly and Breezekit, and everyone knows it! It doesn't matter if their deaths were accidents; they were still my fault!"

Shaking his head determinedly, Flamepelt objected, "No. I refuse to believe it, Minnowpaw. I believe that, in time, StarClan will set things right."

"I'm not even sure StarClan cares about me at this point," Minnowpaw blurted out.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Everyone's given up on me. No cat cares about me anymore."

Flamepelt looked hurt, and Minnowpaw winced. "*I* care about you, Minnowpaw," he whispered. "And I always will."

Minnowpaw touched her nose to Flamepelt's. "I'm sorry," she said.

"It's okay," Flamepelt replied, resting his head on top of hers. "RiverClan will get through this, I'm sure of it."

Minnowpaw fell asleep shortly after, and with the warmth of Flamepelt's body as he stayed with her in the clearing, she did not dream.

Chapter 25

The days drug on for Minnowpaw, and one bright morning RiverClan felt the smallest chill in the air; leaf-fall was on its way. Minnowpaw was still not assigned to any patrols, and she did not hunt for the Clan. Part of her was scared that she'd bring back poisoned prey, and she knew that nothing she caught would be taken by any of her Clanmates. She found it hard to keep busy. Mostly she walked through the forest alone, knowing that if she found anything unusual, she could at least be useful enough to tell Ashstar about it. She still slept in the clearing rather than the apprentice's den, and on most nights Flamepelt kept her company.

Another Gathering came and went, and Redblaze, Cinderfrost, and Poppywhisker all attended as warriors. Minnowpaw had to hear about everything from Flamepelt, because she hadn't been chosen to go; WindClan had chased a vicious fox off of their territory, Tanglestar had recovered from his illness but still looked weak, and tensions between ShadowClan and ThunderClan had risen again. Apparently no cat mentioned the battle for Sunningrocks, although of course Ashstar had to report the death of Shadebelly.

A couple of times, Ashflower brought Ripplekit, Sootkit, and Amberkit out of the nursery to play. Cherryheart accompanied her, and Beechkit, Specklekit, and Reedkit ran around the camp, sticking their noses into other cats' business. Minnowpaw wondered how close they were to becoming apprentices, and how it would feel to watch them become warriors before her as well. Just once, she tried to approach her little brothers and sister, but an icy cold gaze from Cherryheart kept her away. Ashflower looked at her sympathetically, but did nothing. Minnowpaw grew used to it all; the cats who held no grudges against her also did nothing for her except look sorry.

One day, Redblaze asked Minnowpaw if she wanted to go on a patrol with him. "Birchclaw put me on the sunhigh patrol with Flamepelt and Sorrelstream," he meowed. "We thought you might

want to go with us."

Because all of those cats don't hate me, Minnowpaw thought to herself. *Yet.* She stood from her spot outside the apprentice's den and stretched. It *would* be nice to do a patrol, she realized. "Sure," she told the red tom. She followed him to where Flamepelt and Sorrelstream waited by the camp entrance. They both looked thrilled at her arrival, and Sorrelstream greeted her with a purr. It had been hard for Minnowpaw to speak to Sorrelstream lately, with Mudpelt always watching her.

The forest was quiet, and the leaves rustled gently in the wind. Sniffing, Minnowpaw picked up the scents of birds and heather rolling off the moor. "It's nice today," she remarked to her friends.

Sorrelstream's eyes lit up at Minnowpaw's attempt at small talk. "Leaf-fall is on the way," she meowed. "Before we know it, it'll be cold and snowy."

Flamepelt shivered at the thought. "I just hope the river doesn't freeze over. We'll go hungry if it does."

Minnowpaw nodded. The other three Clans struggled to find enough prey in leaf-bare, but as long as the river was running, RiverClan was well-fed all through the cold moons.

The four cats stopped briefly to renew the scent markings along the border, sniffing for any signs of intruders. But the WindClan border was all clear, except for a vaguely sour scent wafting over it. Minnowpaw wondered what it was, but since it was stale she didn't point it out.

The patrol carried on through the forest. At one point, they startled a thrush, and with a quick leap Redblaze brought it down, killing it with a swift bite. "Good catch!" Sorrelstream praised him. He tucked it beneath some ferns to pick up later. They carried on, and Minnowpaw managed to join in on their conversation about weather and prey without too much difficulty. The feeling of ease she felt just patrolling and talking to her friends was almost too much; when had she last done anything without feeling guilty or sad or angry?

"I miss this," she said softly. Sorrelstream, Flamepelt, and Redblaze all seemed to understand what she was saying. Flamepelt entwined his tail with hers, and Sorrelstream pressed her pelt to Minnowpaw's comfortingly.

"It'll be like this all the time," Redblaze murmured. "StarClan willing."

Minnowpaw purred. She so desperately wanted to believe his words. It would be easier, she thought, if she could somehow convince herself that everything would turn out alright, even when she knew that everything that had happened was irreparable. "Maybe things aren't meant to get better," she whispered.

"None of us believe that, Minnowpaw," Sorrelstream reasoned. "We all know that things need to be set right. You need to get your warrior name and--"

"It's more than that, though," Flamepelt cut her off. "It's more than a name. We all recognize Minnowpaw as a warrior, even though she hasn't had her ceremony yet. This goes so much deeper than names."

"Right," Redblaze agreed. "Every cat in RiverClan needs to realize that Minnowpaw has done nothing wrong; it's all been bad luck. If Nightwhisper would stop raving about curses and actually care about his Clanmates, we might be better off." He scratched at the dirt with his claws in annoyance.

"What kind of medicine cat would do that?" Sorrelstream mewed.

"What's worse is how many cats believe him" Flamepelt put in. "It's easier for them to turn on an innocent Clanmate than to face uncertainty." He looked back at Minnowpaw. "But we know differently. We won't quit trying to convince the others, either. We--"

"Shut up," Minnowpaw said. Flamepelt looked hurt. "I hear something." A far rustling had caught her attention, and she pricked her ears towards it. It had come from far behind them, and it sounded larger than prey.

Sorrelstream stood at attention. "I hear it, too," she murmured.

"What other patrols are out?" Minnowpaw asked. "It could just be a cat."

"Bristlepelt's leading a hunting patrol," Redblaze said. "I don't know where they went, though."

"Let's go investigate," Flamepelt meowed warily.

Minnowpaw's pelt was prickling with unease as they padded through the forest. She sniffed for any scent, but they were upwind; whatever it was would smell them before they smelled it. They moved as swiftly and silently as possible, hardly breathing. A short wall of ferns blocked their path, and beyond that, they heard the rustling again.

Flamepelt, as the patrol's senior warrior, moved to the front of the group as they approached the noise. He nodded to them in a silent command, and at once they all leaped over the ferns and into a small clearing.

Hisses and screeches sounded as the four cats landed, and a voice called, "Wait!" Minnowpaw's fur flattened as she saw that it was only the hunting patrol. "Minnowpaw!" Bristlepelt breathed, wide-eyed as he beheld the patrol. Behind him, Nettlestep and Twigtail were sheathing their claws, their gazes a little spooked.

"Oh, thank StarClan!" Sorrelstream gasped. "It's just you guys!"

A slight purr of amusement and relief came from Redblaze. "We were worried it was something else," he admitted.

Nettlestep echoed his purr. She sat and began to lick a forepaw. "Same here," she mewed. "When we heard you tramping through the middle of the territory, we thought it was an invasion!"

Sorrelstream flicked her tail across Twigtail's ears. "Scared you, huh?" she joked to her former mentor, who rolled his eyes.

"Wait," Flamepelt said, his face falling. "The middle of the territory?"

The words finally registered in Minnowpaw's mind, and she gulped. "We were on the WindClan border," she said slowly, fear rising within her again. Whatever they'd all heard was still out there.

Alarm spread across Bristlepelt's face. "We need to split up," he said quickly. "Nettlestep, go tell Ashstar that there's something in our territory." The brown she-cat nodded and dashed off. "Sorrelstream, come with me. My patrol will start at the camp and sweep the forest towards the river. Flamepelt, take your patrol towards the river and head this way. We'll meet you in the middle." The two patrols nodded to each other and headed off in opposite directions.

Minnowpaw's heart was racing. *Something's here,* she thought. *Something that's not supposed to be.* Her paws flew lightly over the forest floor as she followed Flamepelt, with Sorrelstream and Redblaze behind her. Once they reached the stones at the riverbank, they spread out and put a few tail-lengths of distance between each other and began their sweep.

"What if it's ThunderClan?" Redblaze mewed worriedly. "What if they're trying to get back at us for the fight at Sunningrocks?"

Beyond the red tom, Flamepelt was shaking his head, his expression equally worried. "But they won that battle," he countered. "They'd have no reason to invade our territory."

Unless it's Copperfoot, Minnowpaw thought to herself. She trusted the ThunderClan deputy less than a badger, or the entirety of ShadowClan. He was arrogant and pushy, and Rainpaw had admitted to her that he only wanted to be leader. From what she'd heard the other ThunderClan apprentices say, it sounded like Copperfoot was the kind of cat to take matters into his own paws and do whatever he wanted. Would he be foolish enough to invade RiverClan territory?

The patrol moved more slowly now, sniffing at every rock and reed in their way. Minnowpaw picked up no traces of ThunderClan scent; she wasn't sure if she was relieved by that or not. If it wasn't an enemy patrol, then what in StarClan's name were they tracking?

She stopped as she suddenly picked up an unusual smell clinging to

some reeds. Sniffing deeper, she recognized the sour odor she'd smelled coming across the WindClan border. But now it was stronger, which meant it was fresh. "I found something!" she called softly to her Clanmates. They raced over and investigated the scent. Minnowpaw began to follow the trail; it was leading deeper into RiverClan territory, growing stronger. Wherever it was, they were getting closer.

Soon they had come back to where Redblaze had caught the thrush, and now the sour stench was mingled with that of blood and fresh-kill. Stepping out of the ferns, Minnowpaw's jaw dropped at the sight of scattered feathers and blood. The entire little clearing was a bloody, torn mess, and the scent was even stronger than ever.

"It found the thrush," Redblaze breathed, eyes wide at the sight. Flamepelt's gaze was grim.

At long last, with a sickening jolt, Minnowpaw recognized the scent. "Fox!" Before her Clanmates could say anything, Minnowpaw was racing away, still following the trail. To her horror, it was heading straight for the RiverClan camp!

It would make an easy meal out of Ripplekit, Sootkit, and Amberkit, she thought grimly. Her paws pounded faster. *Not if I get there first!*

Minnowpaw sprinted through the forest, and once again collided with Bristlepelt. "What's going on?" her father asked as he steadied himself. "We haven't found anything; have you?"

Nodding quickly, Minnowpaw meowed, "Yes. It's a fox, and it's heading straight for the camp!"

Bristlepelt's eyes widened in alarm, and behind him, Sorrelstream and Twigtail exchanged horrified glances. "We have to get to it before it reaches the camp!" Bristlepelt said, immediately turning tail. The five other cats pounded after him, hearts beating wildly and pelts fluffed out. By now, the fox's scent was overpowering, but other than that they saw no sign of it. Where was it?

At last they broke through the entrance to the camp, met by the shocked faces of their gathered Clanmates. Nettlestep and Ashstar

were speaking quickly, and padded forward as Minnowpaw and the others entered, followed closely by Birchclaw.

"Any sign of anything?" Ashstar asked quickly. His claws dug into the dirt.

"It's a fox," Bristlepelt panted. "Minnowpaw smelled its trail and we followed it back to camp, but we didn't find it."

"It's probably the one WindClan chased off their territory!" Birchclaw meowed.

Mudpelt stepped forward from the crowd, his gaze hostile. "Should we really believe *her*?" he asked, looking around.

Bristlepelt turned on the brown warrior and hissed. "We *all* smelled it," he spat. "There's a fox in our territory and we need to do something about it!"

Mudpelt scoffed. "Of course *you'd* believe her," he said condescendingly. "But I'm not going to risk any of my Clanmates' lives because a cursed cat thinks she smelled a fox!" Minnowpaw's heart dropped as she looked past Mudpelt; it seemed that Pebblenose, Cloudsplash, Cherryheart, Maplenose, and Blacktail agreed with him.

Suddenly angry, Minnowpaw stuck her nose in Mudpelt's face. "Can you really be that mouse-brained?" she spat. "Look past your own ego and find the courage to defend your Clan!"

With a furious hiss, Mudpelt reached out and raked his claws across Minnowpaw's face, and blood welled around her eye. "Don't talk to me like that!" he growled.

Immediately, Minnowpaw launched herself at him and drug him down into the dirt. The two grappled, claws out and teeth snapping, scratching and biting at each other like their lives depended on it. Red-hot fury seared through Minnowpaw. "I'm done taking this from you!" she yowled, kicking hard at Mudpelt's flank with her hind claws.

Screeching, he shouldered her aside and leaped onto her back, teeth

closing around her scruff.

"For StarClan's sake, stop!" Ashstar's yowl sounded above their battle. Mudpelt was dragged off of Minnowpaw by Redblaze, his normally-calm face lit up by shock and anger. "I will not have fighting between my Clanmates!" Ashstar growled.

Before any cat could say anything, a rustling from just outside the camp caught their attention. Blood pounded in Minnowpaw's ears as twigs crunched and the snarling beast moved closer. Her heart lurched, and with little warning, the fox burst through the fern-enclosed wall of the camp and into the clearing.

Chapter 26

The fox stomped into the camp, its yellow eyes bloodthirsty as it eyed the gathered Clan. It growled and screeched, launching itself at the nearest cat: Nettlestep. The brown she-cat yowled in alarm and went down under a pile of rusty red fur. Teeth snapped as the fox's muzzle nearly closed around her throat. In an instant Twigtail leaped, bowling the fox off of her and attacking it.

"Defend the nursery!" Ashstar yowled. Cherryheart was racing back towards her kits, followed by Cloudsplash and Maplenose. Cinderfrost and Poppywhisker went straight for the elders' den, where Troutleap and Blacktail were standing, looking ready to fight. Pebblenose and Ashflower stood outside the medicine den, tails fluffed as they prepared to defend the medicine cats. The sounds of growling, hissing, and screeching were deafening to Minnowpaw's ears. Nettlestep had retreated, dripping blood, to the medicine den, and Birchclaw had joined Twigtail, and both toms battled on their hind legs.

Minnowpaw never knew a fox could be so vicious; it was attacking faster than any cat, nipping and lashing out with its claws, striking true every time. Minnowpaw couldn't stand by and watch her Clanmates get hurt, and after a pained yowl from Twigtail, she pushed off the ground and leaped into the fight.

Her claws met the fox's muzzle and it howled in pain and anger, eyes narrowing at her. Its breath was putrid. It raked her chest with its claws and she growled, biting at its neck. Blood filled her mouth but the fox kept fighting. Birchclaw dropped onto four paws and bit at the fox's hind legs, and Twigtail aimed at its belly with his forepaws. Blood dripped onto the ground from the fox and all three cats. Something was driving this fox to fight so hard, something more than hunger, Minnowpaw realized.

The fox turned its head and closed its jaws on the side of Twigtail's face, then it dropped and dug its claws into Birchclaw's back. Both toms screeched and retreated. Terrified, Minnowpaw faced it alone.

It bore down on her with a ferocity she'd never seen in any living beast, and it tackled her to the ground, intent on killing her. Fear pulsed through her as its teeth came unnervingly close to her throat, and panicking, she kicked out with her hind paws and threw the fox off of her; right into Flamepelt.

The ginger tom yowled in shock as the fox began to rip at him with teeth and claws. Blood poured onto the ground, and with a sickening snap, the fox dropped Flamepelt's neck from its jaws, and his limp body fell to the ground.

"Flamepelt! No!" Minnowpaw screeched. The world around her fell silent, and suddenly the only thing she could see was the fox. Paws pounding on the earth, she flew at it, scratching and biting with everything she had in her. She was only vaguely aware of the pain in her own wounds, and felt little else besides the fox's fur in her teeth and its blood on her claws. She writhed on the ground, tearing at the fox and snarling like a LionClan warrior. Fur and blood flew everywhere and Minnowpaw's gaze was clouded by fury.

Suddenly a voice broke through to her. "Minnowpaw! Stop!" Panting and shaking, Minnowpaw stopped fighting. "It's dead!" Standing, Minnowpaw gazed at the fox's shredded body before her. It was hardly recognizable, its fur and flesh torn and bloodied, its now-clouded eyes staring at nothing. Its teeth were still bared in one final snarl, but it was dead.

She looked up to see who had spoken; it was Tawnyclaw. He was watching her with a horror in his eyes Minnowpaw had never seen before. But she understood why; she'd gone crazy. She'd never felt such anger before, or such a battle rush. And all because...

Turning quickly, Minnowpaw's heart dropped at the sight of Flamepelt's body on the ground. His throat was torn open, and his face lay in a pool of his own blood. She rushed to him, burying her nose in his fur. "No, no, Flamepelt, no," she sobbed. It couldn't be true! He couldn't be dead!

But he was.

The Clan was silent, but all eyes were on the bloody scene in the

middle of the camp. Minnowpaw was dripping with blood, not all of it hers, and the fox and Flamepelt both lay dead in the clearing.

"Minnowpaw," Sorrelstream breathed, stepping forward. Her eyes were locked on Flamepelt. "Minnowpaw, no..."

Other cats were now approaching, horrified expressions on their faces. Minnowpaw suddenly felt sick; she'd thrown the fox into Flamepelt. She was the reason he was dead!

No, no, not again...

Redblaze broke through the crowd, padding slowly with a look of disbelief on his face. Once he finally tore his eyes away from Flamepelt, his grief-stricken gaze met Minnowpaw's. "You killed my mentor," he murmured, but everyone heard it. Loudly and more pained, he shouted, "You killed my mentor!"

"No," Minnowpaw whispered, backing away. It was happening all over again. "I- I didn't mean to... I-"

"Murderer!" Pebblenose yowled.

Murmurs rose from a few cats. "You killed him!" Maplenose exclaimed, coming from the nursery with Cloudsplash and Cherryheart.

"You've killed three cats now!" Cinderfrost called, and Minnowpaw couldn't tell if her voice was more shocked or angry.

"This has to end!" Mudpelt snarled. "Ashstar, you can't let this go on any longer! Minnowpaw has to be exiled before she kills another cat!"

To Minnowpaw's despair, an overwhelming amount of yowls sounded their agreement.

"Banish her!"

"Drive her out of the forest!"

"She's a murderer!"

And for once, no cat spoke in her defense. Tawnyclaw, Sorrelstream, and Bristlepelt were all frozen in place, silent.

Ashstar was shaking his head slowly, and he said, "I- I don't know what to do." His eyes were apologetic and uncertain as he looked at Minnowpaw. "This can't be ignored."

Nightwhisper emerged from his den, followed by Silverheart. "I've tried to tell you all, but how many cats had to die before you believed me?" he spat. "Three! Three of our Clanmates are dead, including our deputy and a kit, all because of one cursed cat! Banish her now!"

"No!" Silverheart gasped. "Ashstar, you can't!"

"But what else can I do?" Ashstar asked, sounding defeated.

Suddenly everyone's shouting voices died away and Minnowpaw found herself staring at not the camp, but the strange forest in her dream, and the spiral of stars landing on the dead cat. Darkness pressed in on her and she once again heard the voices, uttering the same whispered words.

Can't stay here...

Not supposed to happen...

Send her back...

But now, there were new ones, in voices that chilled Minnowpaw to her bones.

A cursed cat...

Should be dead...

Condemn the Clan...

Suddenly, the starry spiral disappeared and Minnowpaw found herself looking across WindClan's moor at Highstones. From Mothermouth came an eerie blue light, glowing bright and beckoning her forward. The whispers were still there, growing

louder and more urgent, and then they stopped, and Minnowpaw was back in RiverClan.

Panting, she looked around. Everyone was watching her, and she met Silverheart's gaze. The medicine cat apprentice looked both terrified and completely certain of something, and her eyes flashed knowingly towards Minnowpaw. She'd seen it, too!

"Minnowpaw has to go to Highstones!" Silverheart exclaimed.

The Clan was silent at first. Then Poppywhisker scoffed, "Highstones? Why in StarClan's name would she need to go to Highstones?"

"Yeah," Sweetstripe agreed. "She's not a Clan leader or a medicine cat!"

But Silverheart's expression was as certain as Minnowpaw had ever seen it. "I don't know why, but she does. StarClan has called Minnowpaw to Highstones, and she must go."

Minnowpaw's mind was reeling. Her best friend was lying dead before her, and then her vision, and now Silverheart's news. She couldn't deny it; she had seen for herself the beckoning blue glow of Mothermouth, and the Moonstone that lay within. And through all her fear and shock and grief and uncertainty, she knew one thing; she needed to speak with her warrior ancestors.

"I'll go," she found herself saying. Her words were met with shocked gasps. "I will speak to StarClan."

Mudpelt prowled forward, his pelt bristling along his spine. No cat stopped him as he snarled, "If you leave, you better not come back. Ever!"

Minnowpaw flinched at his words, a chill running down her spine at the cold menace in his eyes. His words stung, but not as much as the silence from the rest of her Clanmates, which told her a truth that had been a long time coming; they didn't want her here anymore.

"How can you say that?" Silverheart gasped. "How can you tell a

Clanmate to leave and never return? Have you no heart?" Turning to address the rest of her Clan, she called, "I may not know as much as our warrior ancestors, but I know one thing: Minnowpaw is no murderer, and her place is here in RiverClan. She will go to Highstones, and StarClan will set this right!" Her words were broken by a small sob. "They have to!"

Ashstar sighed, dipping his head down. Without looking at Minnowpaw, he whispered, "Go. I can't do anything for you now. Go, and may StarClan light your path."

Minnowpaw didn't have time to wonder if he was wishing her well or banishing her, because her Clanmates began to push forward, herding her towards the entrance, hissing threats and growling curses at her. Her mind, spinning with confusion, could hardly guide her paws along the ground, and before she knew it, she was in the forest, racing across her territory as her Clanmates yowled after her. Her paws thudded on the forest floor, and she rustled every fern and broke every twig between the RiverClan camp and the river. Prey scattered everywhere with alarmed shrieks, but she barely registered it.

She splashed through the cold river, not bothering to find the stepping stones, and hurtled into WindClan territory. In the distance, Highstones stood tall and eerie on the horizon; the only thing that mattered now was getting there. Her claws ached as she pushed on, running faster than she ever had in her life. Fourtrees was within sight, and now the sun was beginning to set. *I can't stay in WindClan territory,* she thought. *If they find me here, they'll attack me.* But there was nowhere else to go, she realized. She wasn't a Clan leader or a medicine cat, as Sweetstripe had said, so no cat would believe that she was going to the Moonstone. A WindClan patrol would only see a trespassing apprentice, so she just kept running, her eyes on Highstones the whole time.

Barking and snarling sounded through the calm silence of sunset, and Minnowpaw nearly jumped out of her skin. Coming over the top of a rise, she saw two large dogs barreling towards her. Pelt bristling in alarm, she changed course and bolted in a different direction. The dogs' barks became shrieks of excitement as they saw her, and she felt their heavy paws thudding along the earth behind

her. Her heart pounded in her chest; she had to get away!

To her relief, she was nearing a treeline, and from several fox-lengths away, she leaped onto the trunk of a tall pine, scrabbling up so quickly it hurt. The dogs jumped up, pawing at the trunk and snapping their teeth viciously, growling in frustration as they could not reach her. Suddenly a loud Twoleg yowl cut over their barking, sounding angry, and the two dogs gave up and returned to their Twoleg.

Minnowpaw's whole body was shaking with fear as she made her way back down the trunk. She was so grateful when her paws touched the ground again, but it was cut short when the strong, musky, unmistakable scent of ShadowClan met her nose. She was in ShadowClan territory!

Before she could turn and head back to the moor, an angry voice yowled, "Intruder!" Peering past the tree she'd escaped into, she saw a ShadowClan patrol racing her way. She recognized Nightfang at its head, followed by Squirrelwhisker, Longear, and Icetail. She sprinted away, silently swearing at her bad luck.

The patrol kept after her, gaining on her with every pawstep. Minnowpaw kept to the treeline, hoping the large pines would give her more cover to hide in. She ducked behind a tree, stopping briefly to catch her breath, and heard the patrol slow behind her. Had she lost them?

Not wanting to risk getting ambushed, Minnowpaw ran again. The pine needles felt awkward and uncomfortable underpaw, but that was the last thing she cared about. She was within sight of the Thunderpath when a body fell on top of her, crushing her to the ground. She tried to yowl but her muzzle was pushed into the dirt.

She expected to feel claws in her back but she didn't. The enemy warrior flipped her over; it was Icetail! "What are you doing?" she hissed. "Are you trying to get killed?"

"Please!" Minnowpaw gasped. "I have to go to the Moonstone!" Her voice was pleading, her eyes wide and round with terror as she watched the white warrior looming above her.

Icetail's gaze turned confused, then thoughtful, then resigned. "Go!" she hissed, releasing Minnowpaw. Minnowpaw faltered for a moment. "Go!"

Minnowpaw flashed Icetail a grateful look, then turned tail and headed away. Behind her, Icetail yowled to her Clanmates, "This way!" Minnowpaw heard her pawsteps pounding in the opposite direction, and she sent a silent thanks to StarClan. *I owe you, Icetail.*

Heart racing, Minnowpaw didn't even bother to stop at the edge of the Thunderpath; she just bolted across, the warm, rough stone leaving her paw pads sticky. She had just made it across when a snarling monster roared by, the harsh yellow light from its angry eyes cutting through the darkness of dusk. Minnowpaw ran on, and the ground began to slope upwards towards the mountain. By the time the moon had completely risen over the horizon, she had made it to Mothermouth, and the dark hole gaped before her, like it was ready to swallow her.

Minnowpaw flopped onto the rocks in front of the entrance and panted, wheezing, for several moments as her breath returned to her. She'd never run so quickly, or so far, and nearly without stopping. Her paws were bleeding onto the stones, and they stung. Minnowpaw rested her head on the rocks and closed her eyes, trying to gather her thoughts. There were so many, and by now none of them were good. Flamepelt's bloodied throat flashed through her mind, and Minnowpaw heaved herself up off the ground. She couldn't bear to rest if all she would see was her friend's body. So, with a deep breath, she stepped forward and into the cave.

Chapter 27

Minnowpaw had never known darkness like this. It seemed to swallow all light and beg for more. She couldn't even see her nose through the blackness of the cave, but still she padded on, growing more anxious with each pawstep. She was aware of the ground sloping downwards, and the tunnel started to narrow. Panic set in; was she going the right way? Surely the tunnel didn't close up ahead? Where was the Moonstone?

Minnowpaw shoved her fear away; she couldn't afford to be scared, not now. No, now she needed answers. And finally, after what felt like moons, cool air hit Minnowpaw's face and the tunnel widened into a cave. She could see a hole in the top of the cave, and Silverpelt shining above. In the middle of the cave was a magnificent stone that stood two tail-lengths high and glittered faintly under the dim light of Silverpelt; the Moonstone!

Taking a deep breath, Minnowpaw stepped forward to the stone, only to be suddenly blinded as the moon in the sky came into position over the hole in the cave roof. The Moonstone shone and dazzled like pure ice, and it took Minnowpaw's breath away. She panted, trying to recover from the shock, and stared at the stone. What was she supposed to do now? How was she supposed to speak with StarClan?

Minnowpaw tried to remember the stories about Clan leaders and medicine cats visiting the Moonstone. What did they do when they came here? Then she remembered; they lay down and put their nose to the stone. She supposed she should do the same. So, nervous and a little scared, Minnowpaw approached the stone, laid down in front of it, closed her eyes and touched her nose to it.

Immediately the cave was gone, and a breeze ruffled her fur. Opening her eyes, Minnowpaw saw that she was on the moor, and it was still nighttime. The stars looked weak and dim here, and it was warm. Was this StarClan?

"You've come," a gruff voice sounded behind her, startling her. Whipping around, pelt fluffed out, Minnowpaw saw a cat facing her. He was a large brown tabby tom with stars in his fur. A StarClan warrior!

Relaxing, she mewed, "Yes. Why did you call me here?"

The tom huffed. "You think we *called* you?"

Minnowpaw tilted her head to the side. "Didn't you? I- I saw Mothermouth and felt something pulling me to it. And Silverheart saw the same thing!" She was beginning to panic again; had they been wrong?

Rolling his eyes, the tom meowed, "We did not summon you. You simply came because it was necessary." His tone was unfriendly.

"But why?" Minnowpaw pleaded. "Please tell me you have answers! I need to know what's happening!" Her throat tightened and her voice dropped as she whispered, "They're- they're all dead."

"The answers were there the whole time!" the tom spat, his yellow eyes glowing with anger. "But you were too fish-brained to believe them! Did you just think that your medicine cat was lying to you?"

Minnowpaw gasped, eyes widening. "You don't mean..." she trailed off. Gulping, she went on. "Nightwhisper was right? I'm *cursed?*"

"Of course you're cursed!" he hissed. "You drowned in the river and returned to your life with no explanation! And yet you kept thinking it was a miracle from StarClan! You're a cursed cat, and yes, your Clanmates died because of it!"

Minnowpaw's heart thundered in her chest, and her vision was blinded by the memories of Shadebelly's body, then Breezekit's, then Flamepelt's. Her chest tightened; Nightwhisper had been right about everything, and now this StarClan cat was confirming it. All those cats were dead because of her.

"That's enough!" came another voice from farther away. Turning her head, Minnowpaw saw a beautiful white starry she-cat padding gracefully over a rise on the moor. She held her head high, with her

gaze pinned on Minnowpaw and the brown tom as she neared them. "I should have known better than to let you take care of this, Hawkshade," she said to the tom, who rolled his eyes at her.

"I'm only telling her the truth," he said flatly. "It's better than comforting her like a kit."

"You could have chosen a better approach," the white she-cat huffed, glaring at Hawkshade. She then turned to Minnowpaw, and her eyes softened. "Walk with me," she said.

Although she didn't really want to, Minnowpaw let her feet carry her alongside the StarClan warrior as they padded back up the rise. The moorland grass was soft underpaw, softer than Minnowpaw knew it really was. Her mind burned with countless questions. "Who are you?" she asked.

The cat looked down at her with a friendly gaze. "My name is Frostfoot," she mewed. "I was once a RiverClan warrior, as was Hawkshade. I'm sorry he was so unkind to you."

Minnowpaw shrugged. "He was right though, wasn't he? If I'm cursed, then there's no use brushing around the point."

Frostfoot sighed, her face troubled. "I'm afraid he was right," she said sadly.

"How can I be cursed?" Minnowpaw asked softly. "Didn't StarClan save me?"

Frostfoot stopped. "Don't you remember anything about your accident?"

"No," Minnowpaw replied. "I mean, I remember falling in the river, and waking up in camp. I've had dreams about a dark forest and a trail of stars, and I keep hearing voices in them."

"What do the voices say?" Frostfoot prompted.

Minnowpaw sighed, pawing at the ground. "They keep saying 'Send her back' and 'Not supposed to happen' and 'Can't stay here.' But I don't know what they mean!"

Frostfoot was nodding slowly. "I need to show you something," she mewed. "Come with me."

Minnowpaw began to follow her again, and they walked for countless pawsteps. As they came over another rise Minnowpaw saw it: the spiral of stars! Gasping, she stopped in her tracks. The moor gave way to the shadowy forest in her dreams, and above the two cats was the trail of stars spiraling into the distance. "That's it," she whispered. "This is what I've seen in my dreams."

Frostfoot nodded but said nothing, and continued walking. They followed the trail of stars until Minnowpaw could see where they ended, on the body of a cat. It lay in the center of a clearing, unmoving as usual. And for the first time, Minnowpaw recognized the cat.

"That's me," she breathed, her eyes locked onto her own body.

"Yes," Frostfoot replied. "This is where you came when you drowned in the river. StarClan found you here, but we did not bring you."

Confusion rattled Minnowpaw. "What do you mean?"

Frostfoot simply nodded to the clearing. "Just watch."

After a few moments, the bushes rustled at the edge of the clearing, and shadowy shapes began to move out of the cover of the forest. Minnowpaw was alarmed until she saw starry fur; they were warriors of StarClan as well! A small pang of relief ran through her as she recognized Frostfoot, then she saw Hawkshade as well. There were five cats in total, and slowly they approached Minnowpaw's still form, their fur rising in alarm.

"Who is that?" One of the cats exclaimed. She was a solid black she-cat with a long tail. "What is she doing here?"

Hawkshade had stepped forward to Minnowpaw's body, sniffing her all over. "This is Minnowpaw of RiverClan," he announced slowly. "She's dying."

"Dying?" another cat, a pale orange tom, gasped. "It looks like she fell in the river," he added, coming closer.

The fifth cat, a tortoiseshell, looked up to the sky, at the spiral of stars leading to them. "Something has happened," she mewed distantly. In her eyes held countless moons of wisdom. "Something that has never happened in the history of the Clans." Looking back down to Minnowpaw's sodden body, she approached. "This is not your time, little one," she mewed comfortingly, placing her paw gently on Minnowpaw's face.

Watching from a distance, Minnowpaw gasped as she felt something brush her whiskers. It was like she was in both places at once, and she was growing scared. But she kept silent and continued watching.

Frostfoot, in the clearing, spoke up. "This young cat has come to join us, but far too soon. And now it appears she is waiting for us to make the final decision. This is strange, indeed." Her voice had dropped, and she sounded uncertain.

"What are you saying?" Hawkshade grumbled. "StarClan doesn't make decisions like that! She's dead, and she has come to join StarClan. If she wasn't dead, she wouldn't be here at all!"

The pale orange tom shook his head. "I don't think so," he reasoned. "If she *was* dead, we could speak to her. But laying there, it's like she's stuck between StarClan and the forest somehow. Life clings to her like the last leaf of leaf-fall, begging that the wind doesn't carry it away."

Hawkshade snorted. "You've got bees in your brain, Sunheart. You medicine cats always try to see things that aren't there."

The tortoiseshell whipped her head towards Hawkshade, and for a moment her yellow eyes glowed with anger. "We medicine cats have the ability to see past our own front paws," she meowed coldly. "But I believe Sunheart is right; this was not supposed to happen. And it does seem like the decision rests with us."

"But is it right, Maplefur?" the black she-cat whispered, looking uncomfortable. "We shouldn't get to decide between life and death! It feels wrong."

"But the choice is obvious, isn't it?" Sunheart cocked his head. "If she wasn't supposed to die, then we'll let her live. We can send her back."

Frostfoot sighed. "I don't think it's that simple." She pawed at the ground. "Of course, I agree that we should send her back; she can't stay here. She is not supposed to join StarClan for a very long time."

"But she's here now!" Hawkshade growled. "Ivyclaw is right! It's not for us to make such decisions. This is all so wrong!"

"I didn't mean that we should condemn her to death!" Ivyclaw stood, the fur along her spine bristling. "But I'm afraid that whatever decision we make will have its consequences."

"That's exactly what I'm trying to say!" Hawkshade snapped back. "If we decide to send her back, it could be bad!"

Sunheart was nodding sadly. "She could be a cursed cat," he murmured.

"She could condemn her whole Clan!" Hawkshade spat.

"That's enough!" Maplefur shot up. "Are you even listening to yourself, Hawkshade? How can you say such horrible things about your Clanmate?"

Hawkshade flexed his claws, his ears laying flat against his brown head. "I'm only telling the truth! She should be dead, and if you send her back to her Clan, bad things could happen!"

Frostfoot jumped between Maplefur and Hawkshade, raising her tail to silence them. "We don't know that for sure!" she said to Hawkshade, who turned away with a growl. "But we must come to a decision now." Letting out a thoughtful sigh, she meowed, "I vote to send her back."

"As do I," Maplefur mewed solemnly.

"You know what I think," Hawkshade said sourly without turning to face them. "Keep her in StarClan."

Ivyclaw looked uneasy, her gaze darting between Minnowpaw's body and the spiral of stars. "I don't want to see anything bad happen to the Clans," she whispered. "If that is a possibility, then I won't vote for it. Keep her here."

At last, it was Sunheart's turn. He padded forward slowly, looking sad, and peered down at Minnowpaw's body. He murmured, "Whatever will happen, will happen," he murmured. Raising his head, he said, "Send her back."

"You're all fools," Hawkshade growled, walking away from the scene. "You'll see that I was right."

Minnowpaw jumped as Frostfoot whispered into her ear, "Come now." She had forgotten the white warrior was next to her. She turned and began walking back the direction they had come, and Minnowpaw followed.

"So now you know," Frostfoot murmured.

Minnowpaw's mind was reeling. "I-I don't understand," she stammered. "You *did* decide to save me. StarClan spared my life! How did that curse me?"

Frostfoot stopped. "Because we made the wrong decision," she mewed simply. "We shouldn't have sent you back to RiverClan. Although you weren't supposed to drown in the gorge, it was wrong of us to twist fate that way. In the end, Hawkshade was right."

"So my Clanmates really are dead because of me," Minnowpaw whispered, more to herself. Suddenly realizing, she blurted, "Can I see them? Are they here?"

Frostfoot was already shaking her head, as if she'd been anticipating this question all along. "I'm sorry," she said. "Yes, they are here, and safe in StarClan. But you cannot speak to them."

"Why not?"

"Because you are cursed. Many other cats here are afraid of your presence, and resent me for calling you here. But I had to tell you." She looked away, pain in her eyes.

Minnowpaw followed her gaze, back to the clearing they'd just been in, and to the shadowy forest just beyond it. "That place," Minnowpaw murmured. "That doesn't feel like StarClan." It reminded her of the dark forest in her dreams, the one she'd run from over and over.

"It isn't," Frostfoot replied. "We found you on the border of StarClan and--" she faltered. "That place," she finished. "You hadn't quite made it to StarClan, so you ended up in between."

"But what is that place?" Minnowpaw asked. If StarClan didn't hunt there, who did?

Frostfoot sighed yet again. "It is not a place for StarClan cats," she answered slowly. "The cats who roam that forest are those who were not accepted to StarClan, for whatever horrible things they did while they were alive. If StarClan did not accept them, then they walk the Dark Forest after death."

Neither cat spoke a word as they walked back to the moor. Minnowpaw still had so many questions, but deep down she knew that none of them would lead to answers she wanted to hear. Rather, it would all circle back to the ugly truth she'd been avoiding all along; she was cursed.

"Are you done playing nursery?" Hawkshade's unfriendly voice greeted them where they'd left him. "So she knows the whole truth?"

Frostfoot dipped her head sadly. "Yes," she mewed. "Now she knows."

"I really am cursed," she found herself saying. "But what does that mean? What do I do now?"

Hawkshade looked at her. "You leave the forest," he said certainly.

Minnowpaw took a step back. "Wh-what do you mean? Why?" Surely he couldn't mean that she had to leave RiverClan!

"Are all apprentices this mouse-brained?" Hawkshade rolled his eyes. Stepping closer, he said ominously, "Death follows you like a

shadow, but because it could not take you, it has taken those close to you." He was so close now his whiskers brushed Minnowpaw's. "Your Clan is not safe as long as you are around. To protect them, you must go to a place where StarClan does not walk. RiverClan has no future while you are with them."

Wide-eyed, Minnowpaw looked to Frostfoot, but the white she-cat was nodding. "I'm so sorry," she whispered. "But he's right. StarClan can do nothing for you now. You must leave the forest, or else your Clanmates will die, one by one."

Minnowpaw felt her heart beating faster and faster, and in a few moments her fear and confusion was replaced by anger. "So that's it?" she shouted. "You've condemned me once, and now you're doing it again?" The two StarClan warriors were silent. "You won't even try to help me, will you?" she cried. "This is not the StarClan I've always looked up to! You're giving up on me!"

"We have no choice!" Hawkshade snarled. "Now you must go! You've overstayed your welcome."

Before Minnowpaw could retort, her eyes flew open and she found herself in the moonstone chamber. It was completely dark, and she bolted up and dashed out of the cave, her whiskers the only thing guiding her along. She ran out into the open, under the cover of the moon, and shot down the side of the mountain.

Chapter 28

Her paws carried her along, and she blocked out the pain of her torn pads and continued running. Minnowpaw flew across the moor, the grass prickly and thick. She didn't know what to do; all she knew how to do now was run. She instinctively headed towards the river, towards home, but a few fox-lengths from the stepping stones she stopped, panting.

She couldn't go home. She was cursed, and if she stayed in RiverClan she'd have to see all of her Clanmates die because of her. The pain of Shadebelly, Breezekit, and Flamepelt's deaths suddenly clawed at her heart. It was almost too much to bear, the memories of losing them, let alone the thought of it happening again. Her heartbeat slowed and her breathing evened out as she stood, completely still, eyes locked on the bubbling river.

"I-I can't go back," she whispered to herself, the realization finally settling in. When she had left the camp, which now felt moons ago, Mudpelt had warned her to never return. Now, she realized, she wouldn't. There was no way she could. If StarClan themselves said it, it must be.

StarClan, she thought bitterly. She turned her gaze to the sky, to the bright swath of Silverpelt. *You've condemned me, and cast me out. You don't care about me anymore.* It was hard to distinguish between all that she was feeling, the rage and sadness and fear. She began walking again, along the river, slowly making her way along the edge of RiverClan territory, but never stepping across the border. As pink light began to stretch across the horizon, Minnowpaw made it to the far side of RiverClan territory, where the forest sloped down and out of the territory of any of the Clans.

Where StarClan does not walk...

Minnowpaw looked back up at Silverpelt, at the now-fading stars. She took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Flamepelt," she whispered. Back at camp, RiverClan would be finishing their vigil for the young

warrior. "You were wrong. You told me I hadn't changed in any way that matters, but you were wrong." Her words were nearly lost in a sob. She managed, "Please forgive me," and stepped over the border, into the world beyond the forest.

She was tired. She was hungry. She was sad, and angry, and scared and confused. She had just left the forest, forever, and she had nowhere to go. Her family and friends, what few remained, were still in the RiverClan camp, along with every Clanmate who had condemned her as StarClan had. She'd never play with Ripplekit, Sootkit, and Amberkit again, or see Tawnyclaw's grumpy gaze soften as he approached her. She'd never hear Silverheart's sweet voice again, or go on a patrol with Redblaze. With a pang of sadness, Minnowpaw realized she'd turned him away from her already.

There really was nothing to return to, anyway.

Minnowpaw suddenly tripped over a rock, and silently cursed. She could hardly think through her weariness. No matter what she did now, she thought, she had to sleep. Trudging along, Minnowpaw came to the Twoleg farm that she knew lay just beyond the Clan territories. There was a twoleg nest, and a large red barn like the one on the way to Highstones. An ugly-looking monster sat sleeping inside it, so Minnowpaw snuck around. There was another smaller nest just beyond, and Minnowpaw approached warily. It was filled with golden straw, and in several nests lay large, awkward-looking, sleeping birds. They cooed softly in their sleep, but they didn't appear to be dangerous. Right now, Minnowpaw didn't really care if they were; she knew her paws wouldn't carry her another step. So, she went to the far corner, beneath the large birds in their nests, and laid down in the straw, letting sleep take over.

———

She woke up to a paw prodding her in the side, and she shrugged it off. "Hey," a voice said, and the paw prodded her again. "Get up; you can't stay here."

Minnowpaw blinked awake, and confusion fell over her as she beheld the straw and the unfamiliar nest. As she remembered where

she was, she met the gaze of a large gray tabby tom looming over her. "You can't stay here," he repeated. "The Twolegs will get mad if they see you here."

Minnowpaw stood slowly, and saw that there was another cat with him, a dark gray she-cat with kind eyes. She looked beyond them, and saw that the outside was bright with daylight. How long had she slept?

"Who are you?" she she-cat said softly. "You smell like a Clan cat."

Minnowpaw's eyes widened. "No!" The two cats jumped back, startled. "No, I mean, I'm not a Clan cat," she said. *Not anymore.*

The two cats exchanged a glance. Were they kittypets? They didn't look like any kittypet Minnowpaw had ever seen; they weren't fat and lazy and dumb. Maybe they were loners, she thought.

The tom looked back at her. "Well, whoever you are, you can't stay here. The Twolegs don't like other animals around their birds." Looking up, Minnowpaw saw that the birds were gone. "They come back here to sleep," the tom explained. "But you should leave." He turned and began to walk away, the she-cat following.

"I don't have anywhere else to go," Minnowpaw murmured. The two cats stopped, gazing at her sympathetically. "I have no home."

The she-cat came up to Minnowpaw and rested her muzzle on Minnowpaw's head. "Don't worry," she said. "Come with us for now; you can get some sleep and figure everything out later. Or you could stay with us."

Minnowpaw's head snapped up. Surely she couldn't stay here? She didn't know these cats! Then again, if she was a loner now, she wouldn't exactly be among familiar faces.

"You'd be welcome," the tom said flatly, and Minnowpaw couldn't tell what he was thinking. "But nevermind that now. You look like the wind could knock you over."

Minnowpaw walked alongside the two cats as they left the small nest into the massive Twoleg garden. The air was cool and the sun

shone brightly, and the two cats looked very happy. They led her to the barn, and she stopped at the sight of the monster.

"Don't worry," the tom reassured her. "It sleeps most of the time, and we won't be near it anyways." He led her away from the monster and towards a far corner of the barn, where the ground was covered with more straw. Clearly this was their nest.

"Rest here for awhile," the she-cat invited. "By the way, I'm Smokey. This is my mate, Jay." Jay dipped his head to her. "What's your name?" Smokey asked.

Minnowpaw hesitated. Her name. It was a Clan name, and it was the one thing that still tied her to the life she'd been forced to run away from. Could she carry that name still, out here away from StarClan's reach? Even then, would she be reminded of her Clan every time a cat spoke to her? She didn't need to think too hard about the answer. With a deep breath, she met Jay and Smokey's gazes and said, "My name is Minnow."